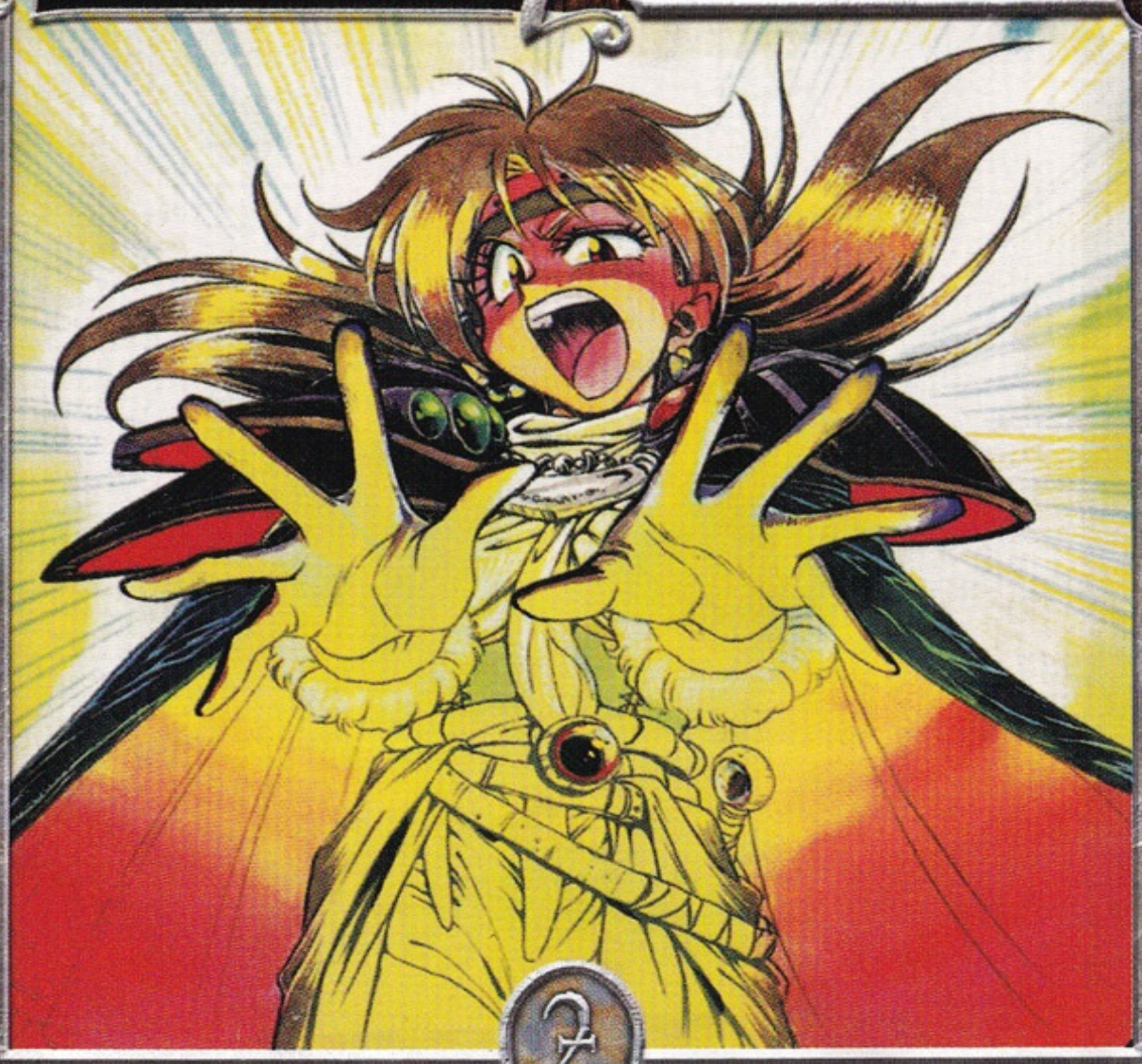
THE NOVEL THAT INSPIRED THE HIT ANIME!

the sorcerer of atlas

# Slayers™



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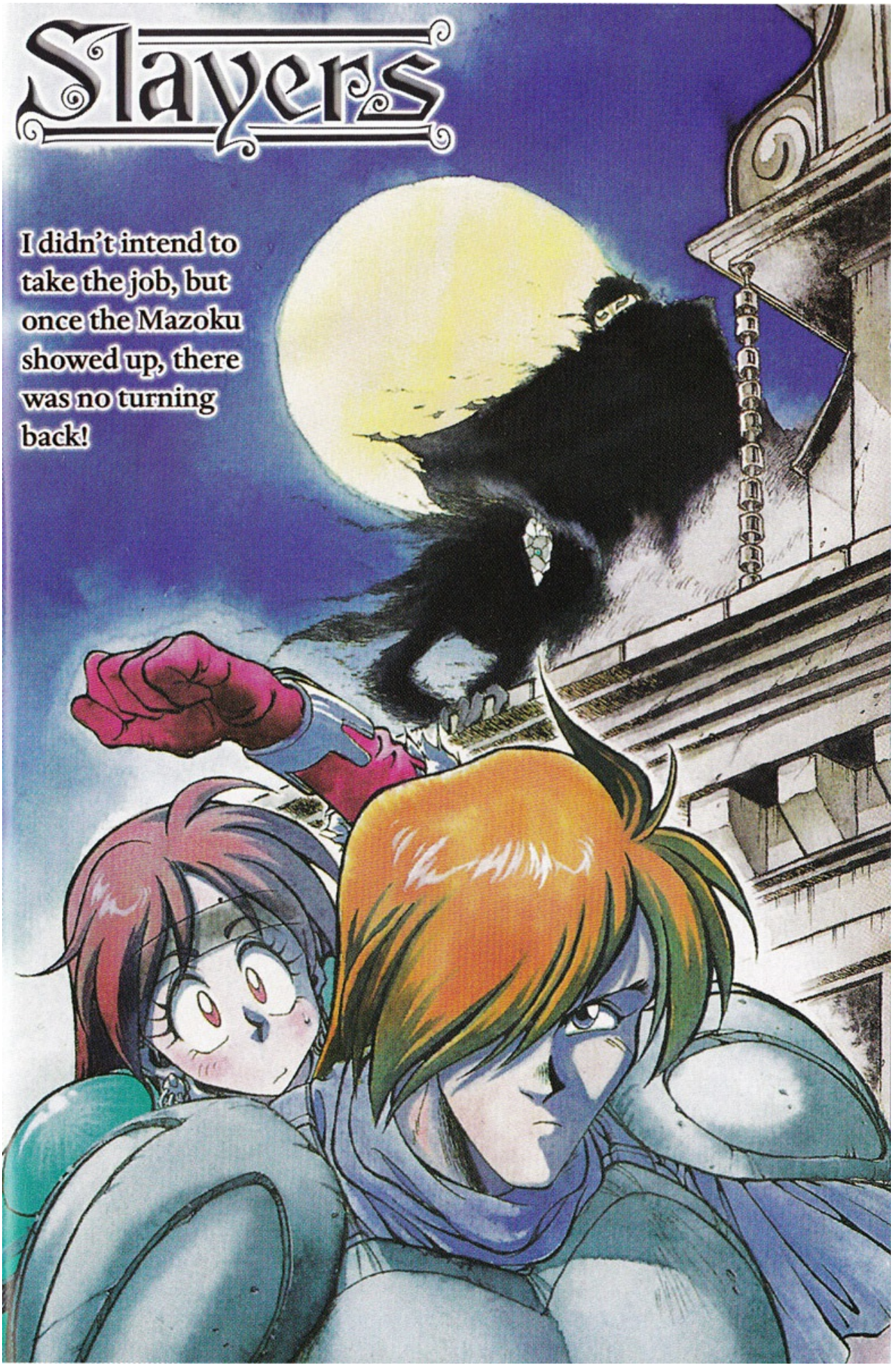
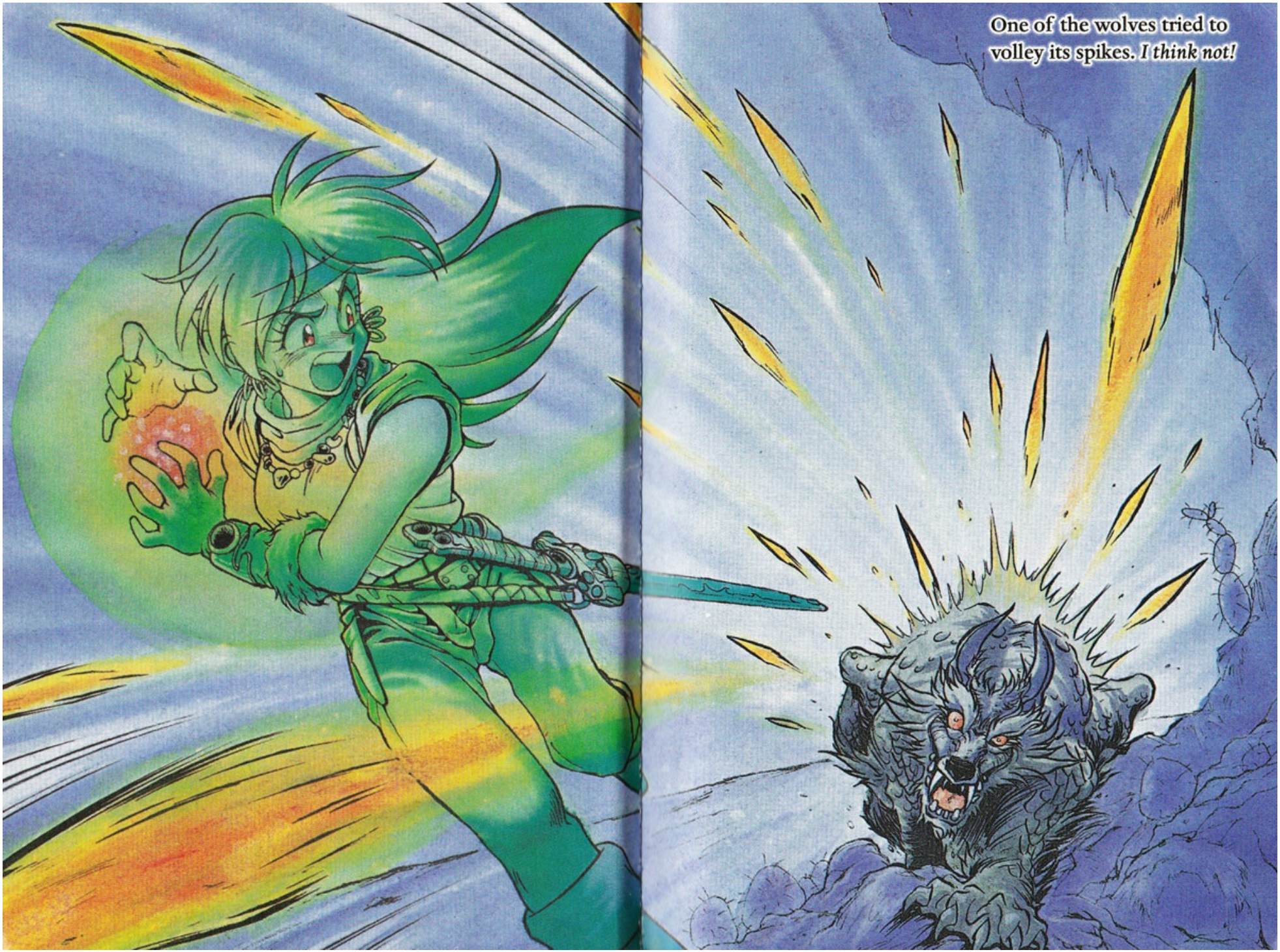
Hajime Kanzaka


Slayers
I didn't intend to take the job, but once the Mazoku showed up, there was no turning back!


One of the wolves tried to volley its spikes. *I think not!*

I plunged into the water with my wind barrier spell in full force. As I got closer to the emerald, I thought I saw a human silhouette inside.

# SLAYERS

## VOL.2: THE SORCERER OF ATLAS

Written by Hajime Kanzaka
Illustrated by Rui Araizumi

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Translation-Jeremiah Bourque
English Adaptation-Kelly Sue DeConnick
Copy Editors-Virginia Pelley and Peter Ahlstrom
Design and Layout-James Lee
Cover Design-Harlan Harris
Editor-Nicole Monastirsky
Digital Imaging Manager-Chris Buford
Pre-Press Manager-Antonio DePietro
Production Managers-Jennifer Miller and Mutsumi Miyazaki
Art Director-Matt Alford
Managing Editor-Jill Freshney
VP of Production-Ron Klamert
Editor-in-Chief-Mike Kiley
President and C.O.O.-John Parker
Publisher and C.E.O.-Stuart Levy

A TOKYOPOP NOVEL

TOKYOPOP Inc. 5900
Wilshire Blvd. Suite 2000
Los Angeles, CA 90036

E-mail: info@TOKYOPOP.com
Come visit us online at www.TOKYOPOP.com

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# R&R! Rod and Reeling

Ever look up from your dinner plate and find that the perfectly civilized restaurant you were peaceably eating in just moments before suddenly looks like it's been ransacked by a herd of noise-sensitive elephants with firecrackers strapped to their butts?

You haven't? Really? Wow. It happens to me all the time. Oh, quit making that face. I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't my fault this time. It wasn't!

Let me explain: there I was in a cozy little cook shack in Atlas City. The food was fresh, but the guests were rotten. Most of 'em, anyway. It was the kind of place that drew a steady crowd of mercenaries and hoodlums, with the occasional ruffian thrown in for flavor. In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have been surprised that a full-on brawl broke out, but I was. I mean, it's no secret that I've done mercenary work from time to time, but that place had a reputation for good eats, and I'd gone in looking for a meal, not a melee. And anyone who knows me will tell you that I frown upon fisticuffs. I'm a pacifist, you see.

No, I am not kidding. Quit your snickering or so help me, I'll wipe that—er… we better keep this moving.

Okay, back to the brawl: Once the battle got into full swing, I found a spot under a corner table and parked there. I had a good view of the action, and I was able to keep gnawing on the drumstick I'd snatched off my plate before it had gone flying. Dinner and a floorshow! Now that I think about it, maybe it wasn't all that bad.

What caused the ruckus, you ask? Oh. Well, it had seemed like such a little thing at first…

I'd just dived into my fourth serving of a dee-licious chicken noodle dish when a fella down the counter decided he wanted to strike up a conversation with little ol' me. He had red hair, and while he wasn't exactly handsome, he wasn't exactly un-handsome either. He wore scuffed leather armor over a tunic-and-trouser combo, and he carried a bastard sword in a scabbard on his back. It took me all of two seconds to figure him for a mercenary of the common variety.

"All alone, miss?" he asked.

I glanced up at him, decided I wasn't interested and returned to my food. "I'm with someone," I muttered, before shifting my attention to the waiter and ordering my next course: chicken soufflé.

The mercenary made a tut-tut-tut noise and waved his finger at me.

Just for future reference: You know what I think of a guy who wags a finger at me and makes a tut-tut-tut noise? I think he's begging to lose a finger. Especially if he does it while I'm eating.

"Now, ain't that a shame? A fella ain't wise to be leaving a cutie girl like you all alone in a place like this." Then he put his hand on my shoulder in an overly familiar way.

I didn't mind the "cutie girl" part, but I didn't much fancy the touching, and the sentiment was pretty insulting. I really hate the implication that just because I'm small and female, I can't take care of myself.

*Watch it, fella.*

"What's your name, cutie girl?"

The soufflé was pretty good.

"My name's Lantz," he said.

Eating with a guy's hand on your shoulder can get kinda annoying, though.

"Cat got yer tongue, cutie girl?"

*Hey!* I felt a strange sensation on my butt. That's right: my butt. Now Lantz was trying to touch my butt! Are you kidding me?!

You know, there's some truth to that old cliché about being surprised by your own strength. I meant to flip him over so he'd land on the counter with a satisfying "thwap!" but I must've tossed him a little too hard, because—

"GAAAAH!!!" Lantz somehow managed to smash into the corner and hit the floor groin-first. I didn't even know that was possible.

*That's gotta hurt.*

Hey! It was completely justified self-defense!

Big bad Lantz let forth a big bad sob, tried to stand up, and as he was doing so, he teetered and collapsed on a nearby table. Unfortunately, it was occupied.

"Hey, you! What do you think yer doin'?!" screeched the disgruntled diner, who upended Lantz onto yet another table… and so on and so forth.

While I suppose, technically speaking, I was the first one to throw a—er—punch, he was asking for it! You can't just go around touching someone's butt uninvited and expect to walk away without the owner of that butt using your face to break a few tables, right?

"Hey, Lina. When you gonna start cleaning up your own messes?" inquired a young, well-built blond man from his position squatting under the table right next to mine. He was wearing a black breastplate and carrying a long sword.

*Gourry! There you are!* I knew him well. We'd been traveling together since we met, which, granted, hadn't been all that long ago, but you learn a lot about a person on the road.

*"My* messes?! Who started it?" I queried indignantly while savoring each chickeny morsel. Gourry snatched a bit of thigh meat before I could stop him. Toad!

*"You* did. You were the first one to swing. Or—er—toss."

"You saw that?!"

"Just as I was coming out of the washroom."

"Gourry! He was trying to TOUCH MY BUTT! He's lucky I onl threw him against a wall, considering!"

"Maybe he wanted to befriend your butt. Or maybe he mistook your butt for some mysteriously bony magical creature, and he was trying to—"

I bonked him on the forehead.

"Jeez, Lina! I was kidding!" he said, rubbing his noggin. "You

know if you'd put up with it a little longer, I'd have come back and whacked him for you."

I glared.

"In this world, there are things you can 'put up with for a little longer' and things you can't! Strangers who try to touch your butt fall squarely into the second camp!"

"Fair enough. But is it possible you might have overreacted just a little?" He gestured at the surrounding pandemonium.

Okay, he might have had a point.

"You think I should finish it?" I asked. After all, I could cast a single fireball and things would get real quiet, real quick. Unfortunately, casting a fireball in a public establishment doesn't usually endear you to local law enforcement.

"Nah," sighed Gourry. "That'd just make it worse."

"So, let's stay right here and wait it out, then."

"But…" Gourry was at a loss for how to finish that sentence. He was right. I'd done my part to start things going. and I ought to do my part to stop them. But how?

"Ah, I got it!" I said, as pleased as if I'd found a bag of money. "How 'bout this: on the count of three, I'll scream real loud and collapse. You draw your sword and swing it as you get up—it'll look like you just struck me. Then you say something like, 'Hmph, that'll teach her!' Everyone will totally stop what they're doing and they'll think you just killed me!"

Gourry didn't like my idea.

"And just what do you think is gonna happen after that?"

"Uh… I hadn't gotten that far."

"They'll think I'm a murderer!"

"Gourry, you know, you really shouldn't worry so much about what other people think—"

"Forget it, Lina!"

"Well, if you're not willing to work with me on this…"

I was just about to pitch my next idea when the front door burst open with a gust of wind, and the room fell weirdly silent.

*Hmmm.*

Gourry and I both got back on our feet and, like everyone else, focused our attention on the threshold.

The first thing I saw was his shadow. Slowly, a figure appeared. He was shrouded in black from head to toe—long black hair, black tunic and trousers; even his nose and mouth were hidden behind a black scarf tied like a mask. He carried a long sword on his back, and I could tell just by looking at him that he knew how to handle it. He was a master swordsman, at the very least.

Gourry could tell, too, and he let out a spontaneous sound of admiration.

They were about the same age—just a hair over twenty—and both were swordsmen. But that's where the similarities ended. The

shadow man was cold, pale… ghostly Even the air around him was different. It was his formidable aura that smothered the rampant bloodlust and quieted the restaurant's rowdy clientele.

He was good-looking, but obviously trouble.

*Hmmm… Isn't that always the case?*

"I'm looking for a bodyguard," he said simply. His voice was just what you'd imagine: cold, clear, and sharp… like a sword.

"If you are confident in your skills and desirous of riches, then speak! The sponsor is Mr. Tarim. It is an excellent offer, I assure you." He'd gotten right to the point. His manner wasn't nuanced, but I'm sure he wasn't hired for his public speaking skills.

Of course, there wasn't exactly a stampede of volunteers.

Atlas City had played host to more than its share of nasty business in the recent past. It could all be traced back to the day the chairman of the city's Sorcerers' Guild, Halcyform the White, had gone missing—about six months before. A struggle for the vacant position had immediately broken out between the two vice chairmen, Tarim the Violet and Daymia the Blue.

The shadow man was acting as a recruiter for Tarim.

Of course, I had no intention of involving myself in any such nastiness, but what can I say? Curiosity got the better of me.

"I'll listen to your offer," I volunteered.

"Heeey, you're—" Lantz the Heinous (the jerk who'd demonstrated such a fondness for my fanny earlier) interrupted. He

was both bruised and bloodied. I guess table dancing didn't work out well for him. Too bad. (Tee hee.)

The shadow man turned his attention to Lantz. "What are *you* doing here?" he asked.

*Hmmm. So, he knows Lantz.* It seemed they were acquainted, though not, I hasten to add, friendly.

"R-Rod sir," Lantz stammered. "Well, uh… Master Tarim asked me to run an errand for him, and then—"

"You're finished here. Go home." The shadow man apparently wasn't known for his verbosity. He looked directly into my eyes, and an icy chill ran down my spine. *"A* sorceress."

*Yep, I guess that pretty much sums it up.*

I'd altered my clothes a little since I'd arrived in the city, changing into my white tunic, dark blue robe and trousers. But I was still wearing my black bandana, dragon scale style shoulder guards, a sword at my hip, my black mantle, and most importantly, my jeweled amulet—it would have been difficult to mistake me for anything *but* a sorceress.

*Though I remember some fool once said he thought I looked like a fishmonger or a waitress. Grrr… Gourry!*

"Fine. Your name?"

"You'll get mine when I've got yours." I wasn't going to give my name first, no way. It's a status thing. Of course, deep inside, I was terrified—but he didn't need to know that! I was trying to slice through the cloud of gloom and doom he'd brought into the room

with him. I had no delusions about taking him on, though.

"Rod," the shadow man answered as bluntly as I'd expected. I exhaled silently.

*This is getting old.* "Lina," I said.

"I see…" he responded with a hint of admiration in his voice. "So *you're* Lina Inverse. I've heard about you."

*Great. He's probably heard the bad stuff: Lina Inverse, Bandit Slayer! Queen of Destruction!*

"Very well. Come with me," he said, turning his back as he spoke.

*Er, hold on…*

"Okay, Gourry. Let's go."

"Uh… I'm going, too?" he asked as he rose to his feet.

*Well, duh…*

Rod sprang into action! In mid-stride, his hand went to the hilt of his long sword and he drew. Everyone in the room expected to see blood on the floor any second—everyone, that is, except…

"Gourry!"

Whether it was instinct or dumb luck (I suspect the latter), Gourry had crouched down to steal another bit of food off my plate at the very moment that Rod was drawing his sword. The crisis passed just as suddenly as it had come on. Rod was able to quickly assess the situation and determine that Gourry intended no

challenge.

"Nice counter. You're good," Rod said, bowing his head approvingly.

"Nah, just better than average, I figure," Gourry replied with his usual banality. Gourry may not look like much, but despite his complete lack of common sense or situational awareness, his skills with a sword are absolutely first rate. *I'm* better than average, and I'm no match for him. Actually, as a swordsman, I wouldn't have stood a chance against either one of them.

Rod was able to accurately assess Gourry's abilities in a single glance.

"I would be pleased to duel with you someday," he said.

"Job comes first though, right?" Gourry made an agile parry.

"You boys can play once the workday's done," I added, teasingly.

"Should you survive," said Rod.

*Apparently, someone isn't feeling very playful.*

As we walked on, his words echoed ominously in my head.

* * *

Location: Atlas City.

Duke Rithahn's Castle Vail occupied a commanding position high above that prosperous municipality and transportation hub. By day, so many people packed the narrow, shop-and cart-lined streets that brawls and pickpocketing were commonplace. But as long as you could avoid getting involved with one or the other, it wasn't a bad place to find yourself. (Though at dusk, merchants hurriedly packed up their carts and closed up their shops, and girls in pretty dresses raced to get home because by night, Atlas City was a different story altogether.)

From the hill, the stately palace, framed by a series of anonymous buildings, looked as if it were a painting. As with most cities of this type, the closer one got to the castle, the wealthier the residents, the more refined the lifestyle, and the more impressive the public works.

Normally in such a large city, the administrative offices for the Church, the Sorcerers' Guild, and the Warriors' Association would hold roughly equal influence. However, in Atlas City, the Sorcerers' Guild building was located right beside the castle wall, giving it great power. Lately, however, the influence of the Sorcerers' Guild was dwarfed by that of the Clerical League of Saillune. The League, it could be argued, commanded more political influence than Duke Rithahn himself.

Such a loss of stature, though lamentable, wasn't surprising considering the vacancy of the chairman's position and the internal struggle over who should fill it. The spirit of dissent had actually taken root in the guild earlier, when a group of sorcerers calling

themselves the Searchers of the Truth blamed the others for conspiring to keep them out of positions of power.

Personally, I didn't have an opinion on the Searchers of the Truth one way or the other.

Though I'd gone into that restaurant around noon, the meal and the brawl had conspired to rob me of the latter half of the day, cutting the rest of my plans short.

Twilight was already setting in. Sorcerers in the employ of Duke Rithahn were hastily casting lighting spells to serve as streetlamps.

*What a waste of a day.*

"Lina…" Gourry muttered in a voice just loud enough for me to hear, but not loud enough to earn Rod's attention as he walked on ahead of us. "What are we doing? You said we weren't gonna take any jobs here."

He was right; I had said that. I'd meant for Atlas City to serve as much-needed R&R. We were both pretty exhausted by the outrageous incidents we'd barely scraped out of over the last few weeks, and we needed to rest and blow off some steam. Our first day in town, I'd told him in no uncertain terms that we would not be accepting any jobs in Atlas City: no way, no how.

But… it's a girl's prerogative to change her mind. Besides, I didn't actually intend to *take* the job. I was curious, and frankly, I saw Rod the Shadow Man as our ticket out of that chophouse!

"Considering the situation, Gourry," I said through gritted teeth, "I figured getting the lowdown on this job was an easier way out

than faking my death.

"Besides," I added, "I said I'd listen. I never said I'd take the job."

"But…" Gourry scratched his head and made that weird little mew sound he always makes when he's confused. "From what I've heard about this Tarim guy, I don't think he'll just go, Ah, that's too bad, take care.'"

"So if it comes to that, we'll fight our way out. I can count on you, can't I, Gourry?"

He grimaced. "You know, I'm starting to think traveling with you isn't exactly the path to a long and healthy life."

"You're probably right," I said, and smiled.

Then, just as suddenly, I stopped cold in my tracks and looked around in a panic. I could feel the flicker of eyes on us. "What've you got, Lina?" Gourry asked.

"I think we're being watched…"

"Huh. You too?" He shrugged, just as off handedly as if he were asking for a sip of water.

*Now just a…*

"Let's take the back way," Rod whispered. Maybe I was the last one to pick up on our spies?

As we shifted our course, my senses went on high alert. A sour smell pricked my nose. I heard a dog barking somewhere in the distance. The tension in the air had every hair on the back of my

neck standing stiff and straight.

Around the next corner, a row of filthy brick-red houses blocked the light from the street lamps. Every city has a "wrong side of the tracks," and for Atlas City, this was it. We soldiered on through the desolation in single file. I didn't much care for the scenery, but it was clear why Rod had chosen the route. Having also noticed we were being watched, he led us down the most lifeless path available.

The better to meet the watchers.

*Like chumming for sharks…*

Rod stopped dead. "Enough of this."

*Hard to mistake an invitation like that.*

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" I sang.

Right on cue: movement. Several silhouettes made their way out from the shadows.*These* were the men who'd been tailing us? They all came out dressed in top-of-the-line bandit-chic ensembles. *Dorks.*

*All righty, then…*

I'd picked up on multiple pairs of eyes earlier, but there was one stare in particular that gave me the goose bumps. Whoever that had been, he wasn't among these macaroni clowns.

*What the…? It couldn't have been my imagination.*

Regardless, it was clearly time to refocus my attention on the situation at hand.

"Tarim's bodyguards, eh?" asked one of the men.

*Well, not yet. But I don't suppose it's worth splitting hairs.*

"Now, uh, that's not necessarily the case…" Gourry piped in, always game to give hair-splitting a fair shot.

"They intend to kill you either way," offered Rod. "Let's see what you're made of," he said to us—or, more precisely, to Gourry.

*Oh-no-you-don't! Is this a setup? Some kind of audition?!*

"Forget it," I barked. "If we take on these clowns, we'll be doing a job we haven't decided to accept. Sorry, I hate to disappoint you now that we're such good friends."

"Disappoint me?" Rod's cold gaze crept back to me. "On the contrary. I'd prefer you *not* accept this job."

"Er… you what now?"

"I cannot fight an ally," he explained, fixing his gaze on Gourry, who was standing just behind me. "Your point is well taken," he continued. "I'll handle this."

The clowns—er, I mean, assassins—were indignant. A single man agreeing to take on ten of them? Why, it was so arrogant as to be insulting.

And yet, my money was on Rod. Easily I'd been making good use of my time, and while we were haggling, I'd also been observing the group's demeanor and roughly gauging the extent of their abilities. In my humble opinion, they were a joke.

I also had little doubt in my mind that they'd been sent by

Tarim's rival, Daymia. But, whatever the case, they were bottom of the barrel. New recruits with little or no experience, at best. *Hmmm…*

Knowing full well he could handle them, I pointed to Rod and declared, "You heard him! If you want to get to us, you have to go through him first!"

"Oh now, that's just mean," Gourry winced. Of course, he could tell these men were no match for Rod and he was having a hard time not laughing himself.

"How dare you mock us!" someone with a genius for the unoriginal shouted. *Mistake number one.* Then, he took off and headed for Rod. *Mistake number two.* The other men drew their blades.

*And mistake number three. Wow, nice goin', guys!*

Rod glared at them coldly and patiently drew his sword. At just the right moment, he stepped forward.

In an instant, the first would-be assassin met with a whirlwind of metal and malice.

The remaining men realized what they were up against and probably messed their pants.

*About time.*

The how-dare-you man's epitaph was written the moment he rushed in Rod's direction. The others wisely lost their will to fight.

"Retreat! Retreat!" one of them called out, his back already

turned to us. Not the most courageous of calls, perhaps, but it was darn tootin' the most prudent.

Unfortunately for them, as they tried to escape in the other direction, they ran headlong into a big man with a bastard sword held firmly in both hands. His face was swollen and his temper flared. It was Lantz, my buddy from earlier.

The men stopped. Lantz charged forward, slicing his unfortunate opponents into, well, slices.

*Ewww. He's better than I thought.*

Rod took his turn with the few that remained. The "battle" was over in a wink of an eye, and neither Gourry nor I could find any cause for critique.

Rod used his scarf to wipe the blood off his sword as Lantz huffed and puffed in our direction.

"I saw that group following you when I came out of the tavern," Lantz sputtered. "So, of course, I followed them. Maybe that wasn't necessary, but—"

"It was not," Rod replied.

Lantz instantly dropped the subject. He glared at Gourry and me a few times with blatant hostility.

"B-but Rod, do you really think that little girl and her goon are up to this job?!"

*Little girl?!*

"Lantz…" Rod growled before I could even open my mouth to

reply.

Lantz trembled.

"I invited them," Rod continued. That was to say, if Lantz doubted our ability, then he doubted Rod's assessment of our ability.

Lantz paled as he caught the meaning behind the words. "I-I'm sorry, Rod sir, I didn't mean to imply…"

"Very well." Rod nodded curtly and walked past. He was back to his Gloomy Gus self.

*Yippee.*

We followed behind, Lantz bringing up the rear. He made a small *thbbt* sound with his tongue that I'm not sure he intended us to hear.

I spun back toward him, my hand on my hip—if he had a problem with me, he should've said so to my face! But an instant before my lips could form the words…

PLOOP! The earth beneath our feet went liquid. The surface of the alleyway had become a sea of mud.

"Whoa! What the—?" Lantz shrieked. He was a big guy, and he'd sunk into the ground up to his knees.

"Lina, I believe this is your department," Gourry suggested calmly, his feet also buried in the mud, and sinking.

"Yeah, I know," I replied.

Rod eyed me cautiously. At last my impulse to call him a "stick in the mud" wasn't too far off.

I focused my attention on finding the source. As soon as I did, I saw a man floating in midair against the dim sky above us. "A wizard, hmmm…"

He wore a black mantle and hood, and a jeweled amulet at his neck. He had a pair of well-made shoulder guards sculpted to look like the heads of blow demons—one on each side.

Blow demons, in case you're wondering, are not exactly handsome little devils.

*Well, he certainly looks the part.*

"I take it you sacrificed that bunch just now to test our strength," I said, figuring we'd skip over the pleasantries.

"I did. And they performed their task admirably," the sorcerer said, grinning and laughing over the loss of his minions.

"Using the earth spirit Bephimos to change the dirt into mud, then attacking from above while we couldn't move… not bad. If I hadn't been here, that might have done the trick," I said, genuinely admiring the strategy.

Of course, I was standing on top of the sea of mud as if I were walking on water, thanks to a little spell I like to call levitation. As soon as I'd felt the soles of my shoes start to sink, I'd cast it, and it kept me high and dry.

"You will not be spared. I, Karuas, promise death to all those who defy the great Daymia!"

“People shouldn’t make promises they can’t keep, Karuas. It’s bad manners. Didn’t your mama teach you nothin’?” With that, I switched to a new spell in mid-cast. “Ray Wing!”

Karuas was instantly flipped on his side.

“Whoa!” he yelped in surprise.

Normally, that spell wraps a wind barrier around a person’s body, enabling rapid flight. It’s more difficult to control than a levitation spell, but—since I had no intention of using it on myself—its blustery nature was just the sort of thing I wanted.

By my count, Karuas was running two spells: whatever he’d used to transform the alley into mud and his levitation spell. No sorcerer, no matter how skilled, could handle more than two spells at once. And of course, if the spells were complex, even two would be too much. While controlling Ray Wing, I might be able to handle a lighting spell, for instance, but I certainly couldn’t cast another offensive.

The good news was that I was sure he wouldn’t be able to cast any more spells, either.

…or so I thought.

Karuas turned to me, and with an unnecessarily crude, “Take this, bitch!” several flare arrows appeared out of nowhere!

*What the—?!*

“Haaa!” The arrows flung themselves toward me and I just barely dodged them. Normally, I could have evaded them easily, but I’d been taken by surprise.

“What’s wrong? Off your game?” Karuas chuckled as he spoke. His shoulder guards chortled along.

*Did his shoulder guards just laugh?*

Hmph. Unless I’d missed a memo, accessories didn’t usually demonstrate anthropomorphic scorn. That could only have meant…

“Precisssssely,” Karuas stretched the word out like taffy in his mouth. “They’re alive.”

*Alive?* It didn’t make any sense. First of all, blow demons weren’t capable of using high-level attack spells. And second, Karuas’ shoulder guards were each about the size of a blow demon head. Assuming these were some special variety of blow demon capable of advanced magical practices, where were their bodies?! Sure, they tend to be a bit smaller than humans, but there’s still no way one of them could fit under a sorcerer’s mantle. Let alone two!

“They’re not normal blow demons, foolish girl. They’re special. They were bestowed upon me when the Lord Daymia made me into a chimera. They are my beautiful pets, and with their help, I can run three spells simultaneously!” Karuas generously explained.

*Oh, good. It’s nice when people are proud of their pets.*

So, he and the two blow demons had a symbiotic relationship. Together, they could levitate, control the mud spell, *and* conduct an attack. With that going for him, he clearly had an advantage. However…

“Light!” I struck Karuas with my lighting spell. Since levitation was a low-agility conjure, he couldn’t dodge it. *Too bad.*

“Gaah!” he cried out. The great ball of light glowed just inches in front of his eyes.

“W-where are you?!” Karuas bellowed, flailing. I’d blinded him with my light.

“Up there!” the blow demon on his right shoulder yelled, ratting me out.

Fortunately, he hadn’t quite recovered his sight when he raised his chin to look up.

And as soon as he did, I revved up my attack… CRASH! I landed on his face with both feet. Then, positioning myself directly above his noggin…

KA-THUNK! He took a header straight into the sea of mud. No sooner had he hit than he was buried waist-deep.

I alighted atop his protruding butt-mound and calmly cast my next spell.

“Freeze arrow,” I whispered, and my cold arrows pierced the ground and froze the mud in an instant.

The sorcerer’s body twitched, then ceased to move altogether. At that, the ground returned to its original form. The blow demons must have died as well, releasing that spell.

*In with a bang, out with a sad and squishy thud.*

At the root of Karuas’ defeat was his belief that his strength could be measured by the number of spells he could use simultaneously.

*It's not the size of your spells, boys. It's how you use them.*

I turned toward the others. "Whatever you're going to do, do it fast, okay?" pleaded Lantz. He and the other two were still buried waist-deep.

*It's true what they say, you know: A woman's work is never done.*

* * *

The steamed Roania lamb was DELICIOUS! Sprinkled wit spices and sauteed with green veggies, its taste and delicate fragrance lingered like that of a very fine wine. The mussels and fried shrimp weren't bad, either!

In fact, I'd go out on a limb and say that supper was one of the most extravagant feasts I'd ever seen, let alone eaten. If it hadn't been part of a job interview, and if Rod and Tarim hadn't been there, it would've been a perfect night. But it was. And they were. So it wasn't. Alas.

Our host, Tarim the Violet, joined us at the table. He was rather plump—well acquainted with extravagant dining—and middle-aged.

Are you familiar with color suffixes? Phrases like "the Violet" and "the Blue" are appended to the names of those sorcerers within a guild who hold significant offices or who perform important deeds. They wear robes and mantles of the same color, and though the hues don't correspond to any rank or hierarchy, they do make for easy recognition. I'm digressing, but you might be interested to know that I actually received a color title from the Sorcerers' Guild in my

homeland as a special honorific. They had a custom robe and mantle made for me, and they were to be handed over during an official ceremony at the guild, but I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't wear… pink!

When word got out, the other sorceresses laughed at me! "Lina the Pink!" they howled, "You'll make a great cabaret dancer!"

"Like hell I will!" I yelled back at the top of my lungs, but all that got me was more roaring laughter.

*Oh, shove it, all of you.*

Of course, it was a guy who picked the color! "Pink is perfect for such a precious girl," he pronounced.

*What?* In what universe does a Black Sorceress go around wearing all pink?!

Anyway, as inappropriate as my pink was, Tarim's violet was doubly so. While a perfectly fine color on its own, violet doesn't flatter everyone.

I mean, it would suit a slim, handsome man well. It might add a mysterious aura.

However… watching a middle-aged man stuff two buffet tables worth of fine foods down his throat, his plump body wrapped like a sausage in vibrant purple silks, wasn't exactly doing good things for my appetite.

He was completely bald, which isn't a bad look on its own, but it's weird on a roly-poly frame—like a cherry on top of a sundae. And he blinked so often and so hard I started to wonder if he had

something stuck in both eyes! The worst, though, was that instead of having wine with his food, he was about to light up a cigar.

*This is where I draw the line.*

"HEY! I'm eating here!" I yelled, barely managing to keep myself from whacking him on the spot.

What? Oh, like *you* want to breathe farty-cigar stink while *you're* eating? Anyway, he obliged and stubbed out the stink-stick before it was even properly lit.

His story about the antagonism between him and Daymia matched what I'd heard on the street. What was different was how Tarim characterized the "succession dispute" as a one-sided series of attacks on him by Daymia, which forced him to hire mercenaries as bodyguards. Still, that was pretty much the story I was expecting.

"I would very much like for both of you to become my b-b-bodyguards," he said weakly, his voice much more dignified than his appearance. He was having difficulty saying the word *bodyguard,* for some reason. "Although he continues to send assassins after me, as I have told you, I have no intention of engaging in the same foul behavior."

*Riiiight…*

“After I become chairman, I will see that he’s properly dealt with. Now, don’t misunderstand me. I am referring to removing him from his post, nothing more.”

“What will you do if Daymia becomes chairman?” I asked.

He laughed it off with a wave of his hand as if I’d made a joke. “That’s not going to happen. I assure you, *I* will be the next chairman. Yes, certainly, his magic is stronger than my own. Perhaps even twice as powerful as mine. He’s the second born of a noble family, so he has a lot going for him.”

“However…” He paused, leaning forward and lowering his voice. “He’s a little… odd.”

“He’s what?” I asked, wondering why he was being so vague.

Gourry didn’t seem to be interested in listening. He was fully absorbed with picking the green peppers out of his vegetables.

*Don’t let our conversation interrupt your freakish behavior there, genius.*

While I focused on Gourry, Rod held his post at Tarim’s side. The bloodlust that I’d sensed in him from the start hadn’t dissipated one iota.

I was getting bored with it, frankly.

“I have come to believe that Daymia is pursuing an avenue of inquiry that is currently forbidden among sorcerers!” Tarim announced loudly.

“You know, we can hear you. You don’t have to shout,” Gourry

responded.

*Gourry! That was rude!* I gave him a swift kick under the table. He raised an eyebrow and continued picking his peppers.

Tarim continued undeterred. Whatever it was that Daymia was up to, Tarim seemed deeply concerned.

"I have known for some time that my colleague has a particular fondness for ancient immortality research, homunculi, chimeras, and the like. Playing with life in that way is… counter to the code of ethics adhered to by our kind…" he said, his obvious resentment causing his voice to trail off.

*Now we're getting somewhere.*

There's never been any shortage of people who enslave themselves to the quest for eternal life. About five hundred years ago, the sitting king of the Principality of Letidius, then at the height of its glory, offered an enormous reward to anyone who could grant him immortality. A massive wave of violence broke out across the land—inside and outside the kingdom—as sorcerers competed for the reward. A mere two years after his appeal, civil war and foreign invasion claimed both the king and his kingdom. So much for immortality. Sorcerers still refer to that period as the Dark Age.

Even today, the first lesson driven into every student of sorcery is that the experiments of that era must never be repeated. And it's just as well, if you think about it. I mean, say you do create your own Potion of Immortality, how are you going to test it? *Exactly.* Those experiments always end in tragedy.

Now, there are sorcerers who've lived for two hundred years or more—usually they've made pacts with Mazoku in exchange for longevity. However, one thing remains clear: All that lives must perish. That's a law even an outlaw sorcerer can't break.

In any case, all that the conversation up to that point established was that Vice Chairman Daymia wasn't the kind of guy I wanted to be associated with.

"The electors for the chairmanship are well aware of this." Tarim concluded, "He will never be made chairman, no matter how many times he stands for the position."

"Huh…" I muttered inelegantly. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Now, on the other hand, my area of study is the linguistics of magical research," Vice Chairman Tarim said, suddenly switching gears.

*Is he seriously... bragging about that?*

He was! *What a self-important jerk!* I would rather have shriveled up and died than listen to him go on about the intricacies of magical gobbledy-gook.

"Of course, laboratories and rites are necessary for the practice of sorcery, but the most important factor is the spoken word," he droned. "For without words, there can be no spells. But why do words have this effect? How do they draw upon powers not readily apparent in nature? Let us turn to my research."

*Oh, god.*

He was *really* dragging on. I considered committing suicide by swallowing my tongue, but opted instead to change the subject.

"So, what was Chairman Halcyform researching when *he* disappeared?"

My question apparently startled Tarim. His body quivered.

*Huh? What's that about?*

It wasn't just that I'd interrupted him. Something about the subject I'd chosen was seriously disturbing him.

"The chairman was…" he trailed off, searching desperately for an appropriate answer. "Life—yes, yes! He was doing research related to life." He had phrased it so strangely, it was obvious he was hiding something.

"So… something went wrong?" I asked, looking directly into his eyes. "We still haven't said we'd take the job…" I reminded him.

"Well." The vice chairman's hands shook a little. "That, I am afraid, I cannot tell you, even at the cost of your refusal."

"Seriously?" I was caught off guard by that one.

"Yes. If you feel you cannot work effectively without knowing, then perhaps this is not an appropriate job for you."

*Hmmm.*

I guess, in retrospect, things could have gone much worse. After all, I'd gone there seriously prepared to fight my way out. However, I felt that Tarim was relying on his powers of persuasion and not being entirely honest.

“In any case, I’m far too young to die. I seek able bodyguards, and I eagerly await your reply.” That said, he returned to the food on his plate with a clumsy wink.

I almost choked on my pork stew.

* * *

The city was enveloped in darkness.

Gourry and I walked down the main street in silence. Just a little further and we’d be downtown, the area filled with inns and taverns, strip clubs, and so on. The street lamps did their best to poke holes in the blackness and light our way. Most of the people in the row houses we passed were already fast asleep, so few oil lamps offered assistance through the closed curtains.

Then, the street grew darker still. The brightest light in the area was now the full moon’s reflection off various windows.

Though I’d given a vague and inelegant “I’ll think about it” reply when we left Tarim’s place, I had no enthusiasm for the job. Which isn’t to say I wasn’t taking it. Of course, Tarim wasn’t pleased, but I got an “Ah, I see” reaction as soon as I gave him my name.

Not to brag, but I’m pretty famous.

…or infamous, you could say.

“She fires Dragon Slaves blindly!” they say. “She’s a destructive force of nature!”

“She conducts strange magical experiments, creating lakes of blood with corpses littering their banks!” And so on…

Those kinds of completely unfounded accusations *really* chafe my hide!

Certainly, a vice chairman of a Sorcerers' Guild in a city of this size would have heard those rumors. Still, he wasn't perturbed at the mention of my name. Maybe he wasn't taking my words at face value?

After all, anyone can claim to be a famous person and try to use that to his or her advantage. Perhaps he thought that we were doing something like that. Or maybe after I asked about Chairman Halcyform, he decided I wasn't going to take the job anyway, so it was better that he play it safe?

I was absorbed in those musings when, suddenly, someone grabbed my collar and jerked me from behind!

It was Gourry. "This way," he said in a lecturing tone. "Even though it was watered down, little miss 'wine is wine,' you *do* get drunk when you drink too much."

*What's he talking about*? Neither of us was drunk as near as I could tell.

"Whus drunk?" I asked.

*Oh..*

Okay, yeah, I was slurring a little—so what? I was completely levelheaded! I took a wrong turn because I was lost in thought, that's all. I mean, Gourry'd had more to drink than I had, and he was walking and talking just fine!

"This way," he said, somehow making the ground spin in the

opposite direction.

"Mmmm…" I decided it was best to fix my eyes on Gourry's back and follow close behind, just until they stopped rearranging the buildings.

A few steps further along, I bumped smack into his back. "Gourry! Don't stop short like that—"

The moment I opened my mouth I knew something was wrong. The familiar darkness of night was thickening. The moon was now obscured, and not by clouds, either.

Two dark shadows stood on the rooftops, obstructing the moonlight.

A cold wind blew over me, instantly waking me from my stupor.

I muttered, "That's…"

Okay, I might have been slurring my words a bit. That doesn't mean I was drunk. I was *not* drunk.

And even if I was a little drunk, those figures were neither a dream nor an alcohol-inspired illusion. And how do you explain that spooky feeling?

Those of you who've encountered apparitions before, you'll know exactly what I mean. If you've never run into one, it's kinda difficult to explain the feeling. It's a strange, icy sensation.

"Mazoku…" Gourry muttered.

The two figures remained there, still as the dead; their mantles flapping in the wind. The one on the right wore a white mask, like

you'd wear to a masquerade ball, though it appeared to be made of stone. But the rest of him was shrouded in black. Because he was backlit, it appeared as if he were faceless, save for the white mask, of course.

The other one was crouched down, roughly humanoid in shape, but it was difficult to make out more than a black mass. The left side of its face was also covered by a white mask, this one pieced together from tiles.

I finally got it. They were the ones who'd been watching us. They were the ones who sent the assassins our way.

They stirred. The hair on the crouching one with the split mask fluttered in the wind. He pointed an unnaturally long finger at us. "Tarim's guests…" he said in a thick, old voice. An emerald embedded into the white side of his mask flared for a moment. Apparently, it functioned like an eye. "Surely you have not accepted his offer," he continued. "You'd be wise to reconsider, should you hope to live long."

"Whatever Tarim told thee, the opposite is true. There is only one choice if ye wish to live," the one in the full white mask added. His manner was calm, almost majestic. The tone of his voice was akin to a priest at Sunday Mass. Paternal, nearly.

I laughed loudly. "Duh heck 'r ya sayun? I gut no raisin to beleef duh ikes ob yu!"

The Mazoku were understandably taken aback by the force of my words.

Shut up.

“She said, ‘What are you saying? I have no reason to believe the likes of you!’“ Gourry translated for me. The dear heart.

The split-masked one clicked his tongue. “What’ll we do, Master Seigram? I do believe she’s too drunk to take us seriously.”

“I care not, Gio. Our mission was to deliver a warning. That it be heeded is not our concern.” The one with the full white mask—the one called Seigram—was obviously the elder demon.

The one with the split mask, Gio, let out a small sigh, then turned to me. “Stay out of this affair, if ye be wise. Understand?”

“ ‘Sfhtay ut ob dis offair, uf de be withe. Orderstand?’ he said,” Gourry translated back to me. *Smartass*.

“The message has been conveyed.” And with that, the two melted into the darkness, taking that creepy cold feeling with them. All that remained was the soft: light of the full moon.

“Hoho, ur putty brayve ta puck a foot wit Lina the Goat.”

“‘Ho ho, you’re pretty brave to pick a fight with Lina the Great!’” Gourry was now translating my own words back to me.

He has to have been drunk, right? That man was *definitely* drunk!

* * *

The next morning was surprisingly pleasant, considering.

I woke up Gourry, who was sleeping in the next room. We shared a light breakfast on the first floor of our inn and talked about

the night before.

"So what did you make of those guys? Demonic minions of Daymia or someone else?"

"Those guys?" Gourry halted the fork en route to his mouth and stared at me.

*Ha ha! My chance!* My right hand lashed out. In a single impressive movement, I managed to cut a bit of fried chicken off the bone and flick it high into the air. I caught it in my mouth just as it started its return to the earth, and before Gourry knew what hit him, I'd gobbled it down. *Ha ha! Sucker!*

"Hey!" Gourry barked.

"What? I saw my chance and I took it!"

"Oh, I see, so that's your game…" he fumed. "Take that!" he said and had a go at *my* breakfast.

"Aaaaah! My precious sunny-side-up egg!"

*I'll show you no mercy, you fiend!*

"How dare you! Even if you are my traveling companion, there is no one in this world that I, the great warrior and sorceress Lina Inverse, will forgive for laying a hand on my eggs, sunny side up!"

"You sound like a regular weirdo, you know that, right?"

"Silence!! Or else I'll do…*this!* Ha HA!" and I took another swoop at his vittles.

"Oh yeah? Well what if I do *THIS?!"*

“Pardon me, sir, madam—”

“You brute, how dare you! Then I’ll do *this!”*

“Gah! You strike like an ogre! Take THAT! My miracle two-stage attack! Feint thrust!”

“Eeeh?! Ogre?! You’re a demon! Okay, you asked for it!”

“Pardon me… sir, madam?!”

“Fear my mad, bad breakfast technique, sucker!”

“Oh, you think you’re all that? See this? Mine! And this is mine! And this!”

“SIR, MADAM!”

*Wuh…?*

We began vigorously dueling over the table with our forks and knives. Stab! Swipe! Munch! Stab! Bite! And stab again!

The innkeeper looked pained as he pleaded, “Please eat your meal quietly. “

The last bit of chicken fell tragically from atop our clashing forks and landed on the ground. And just as suddenly as our food feud began, it was over. At the—um— *request* of the innkeeper, we moved to Gourry’s room to continue our conversation.

“So, what did you make of those guys?” I repeated. “What guys?” Gourry still didn’t understand the question.

“Duh. The two Mazoku we met earlier. What did you make of them?”

“What two Mazoku?”

*Uh… hello?*

“You know, the two we met coming back from Tarim’s place. Them!”

“Oh!” he said, palming his fist. “I don’t seem to remember them.”

*Gahhhh!*

I got right up in his face. “What do you *mean,* you don’t remember them?!”

“Well, sometimes, when I’ve had a little too much to drink, I—uh—forget things.” He blushed and continued, “I remember being at Tarim’s last night, but after that, zip.”

“Are you serious?!”

*So he was drunk. I knew it!*

“Zilch. Sorry. I’m drawing a total blank.”

*Sigh.*

With no other option, I filled him in on our adventures from the night before.

“Huh. No kidding?”

“No kidding.”

“Wow. I don’t remember any of that. I translated your gibberish? That’s awesome.”

"Hmph, it wasn't *that* awesome. Anyway, that's beside the point."

"Yeah, okay…" Gourry rubbed his jaw, deep in thought. "Well, it makes sense that the Mazoku and Daymia's assassins are on the same side."

"Yeah. Something stinks about this, though."

"Yeah. Wait. You mean… ?" Gourry looked at me skeptically.

"Yep." I rolled over on my side and started formulating a plan. "I had absolutely no intention of taking this job, but I'm not running away from a demon threat like a scared little girl. We're taking it… it's on!"

* * *

The city bustled with energy. The marketplace overflowed with carts and people.

*Aaaaaargh! Where did all these people come from?! It's so crowded I can barely walk!*

We gave up and moved to a less-crowded side street where I was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Of course, by "less crowded" I mean it wasn't wall-to-wall people or a major thoroughfare. There were still lots of people around; if anyone was looking for us, they'd have a difficult time picking us out of the crowd.

"What on earth do you think would make a person want to live in a place like this? Too many tourists!" I grumbled, not really

wanting a response.

"Well, you know…" ventured Gourry, "Technically speaking, *we're* tourists here, too."

"I *know* that. I'm just getting it off my chest." I continued to grumble and mutter under my breath as I walked alongside Gourry.

Then… I sensed a presence to my right. It wasn't hostility or bloodlust, but rather, something bright coming toward us.

"Please…" It was a female voice.

I turned to face the speaker. She wore white clothes and had hair as red as the setting sun. As she spoke, she looked straight ahead. "Don't involve yourself with this matter."

"Huh?" I stopped walking.

"What is it?" Gourry asked.

When I turned to point her out, she was gone. I scanned the crowd, rising up on my tippy toes to find her.

*There!*

The crowd parted for a second, and I saw her again. She saw me and bowed her head slightly. I couldn't make out her eye color. I'm not sure why I even tried.

"Miss!" But it was too late; she was gone. I stood there, staring blankly, until…

*THUD!* Some jerk bumped into me.

"Fool! You can't just stop in the middle of the street, you stupid

little brat!”

*Stupid?!*

I took a moment to chase the jerk down and kick him hard, right between the legs. If anyone ever tells you that violence won’t make you feel better, they’re lying.

What? Aw, he was asking for it!

# Puppet Soldiers of the City at Night

**"H** o ho! So you've decided to accept! I'm grateful, truly grateful, indeed!" Blubbering with delight,

Mr. Tarim continued barbecuing his roast. (He became Mister Tarim once we'd taken the job. You can't call your sponsor by his first name. Everybody knows that.) He occasionally brought his cigar to his mouth, giving it a couple of puffs for punctuation.

*How can he even taste his food after that thing's been in his mouth?*

We were sitting around a table in the mansion's backyard, talking about the job.

"This is highly reassuring, I must say. Now I can sleep at night without worrying about Daymia and his ridiculous assassination attempts," he said, smiling. In fact, had that smile been any wider, it would've eaten up his whole face.

"I don't mind you feeling safer, but don't use it as an excuse to take any foolish risks, okay?" I warned. "How long do you expect to keep us on?"

"Ah, yes. Details! The new chairman will be elected in two weeks. Things should settle down after that. Until then, you'll be paid daily, plus expenses."

The amount Mr. Tarim was offering was even more than I'd expected, and I'd expected quite a bit. After all, if he hadn't coughed up some serious money, it would be like he was telling us he didn't

think we were worth top coin. And you don't want your bodyguards to think you don't have any faith in them.

Of course, when you considered that taking on Mazoku was part of the job description, well, then the fee looked a little low. But I wasn't going to complain.

We wrapped up our negotiations and decided to have a better look around the place. Knowing your surroundings is an important part of any security job. You might want to write that down.

"Sightseeing?" A mocking voice called out to us from the house's first floor as we were our way to the second.

With arms folded and gazing at us with contempt, it was none other than Lantz.

"Oh, good. It's you," I replied, expressing my displeasure.

"We're inspecting, not sightseeing. If there's an attack, we'll do a lot better knowing where to fight and where to pull back. But I shouldn't expect someone who can't keep his hands off a girl's butt to be evolved enough to grasp strategy," I said, glaring at him. I figured Lantz's nose would be bleeding from a tear like that, but he was unfazed.

*Damn.*

"Sorry, I didn't expect to see a little girl and her pet goon wandering around un-chaperoned in a place like this."

*Little girl?! Grrrr!*

All right, yes: I'm a little shorter than most people. That's a fact,

but I can't stand having it rubbed in my face!

"Oh, I get it, you're into little girls' butts. I'm sorry, but I don't think we can be friends."

"Sheesh…" Lantz was momentarily speechless.

*Got him.*

"What's that? Did I hit a nerve, Lantz? You don't *have* any friends, do you, butt-lover?"

"Sh-shut up!" He was taking me seriously. I gave him a couple of exaggerated nods.

"Well, it figures, with that personality."

"Yeah, you'd better fix that personality real quick," Gourry added.

*Yeah, Gourry! That's some snappy comeback there, genius.* "If you don't, you'll end up with someone like Lina." THWACK! I introduced his head to the corner of the railing.

*I hope that hurt.*

"What the hell was that?" I demanded. "Whose side are you on?!"

Gourry looked at me with a pained expression, scratching his head.

"Well, I wasn't really thinking…"

"Clearly!" I said, and turned to the other buffoon. "Okay. Lantz, was it? First of all, Mr. Tarim figures we're able to cut the mustard

—and Rod does, too. Do ya think they'd hire a couple of strangers if they weren't sure we could do the job? Do ya?"

"I dunno. Maybe," Lantz replied like a sullen child. "Look, you were there when I defeated Daymia's sorcerer, weren't you?"

"What? All you did was ram him into the mud. That doesn't prove anything except that your opponent was an idiot."

*Argh!*

Okay, clearly my opponent had been an idiot—I couldn't argue with that. But obviously Lantz was still holding a grudge because of that unfortunate incident at the restaurant with his groin and the corner. He was still upset over *that*? What a crybaby!

"All right, how about this? I'll show you what we can do," Gourry said, casually drawing his sword.

*Gourry! What are you thinking?!*

"Fine!" answered Lantz.

"Guys, guys, now calm down…." *Too late.*

Lantz drew his sword and retrieved a gold coin from his pocket, his hands shaking. He held it in his right hand, pointing it skyward. With his left hand, he placed the gold coin on the tip of the blade, and then… he balanced it there.

*Nice.*

It was the kind of trick that could have been performed by a talented amateur, but I was still impressed.

“Ha!” Gourry swung his sword directly before him as he shouted. Then came two light, metallic chimes and… Lantz and I both were agog.

The gold piece had fallen onto the mat, split perfectly in two—right down the middle! In a single motion, Gourry’d bisected the coin while it was balanced on the tip of Lantz’s sword. The skill, speed, and force required for that little stunt were unimaginable!

“I—I don’t… that’s incredible!” Lantz’s voice echoed with genuine admiration.

I moved several steps up the stairs.

Having satisfied his pride, Gourry sheathed his sword and turned to follow me.

*Time to crack him on the skull, methinks!*

My flying knee smash sent Gourry tumbling. His forehead made a dull, wet thud against the floor.

“Why did you do that to big brother?!” Lantz yelled at me while helping Gourry up from the floor, his eyes brimming with concern.

*Big brother?! Since when did Gourry become that guy’s big brother?*

“Hey, that hurt! Wh-what was that for?!” Gourry asked as he came to, rubbing his forehead.

“That—” SMACK! “—was for—” SMACK! “—wasting—” SMACK! “—money!” SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! I may be a sorceress, but I come from a family of merchants, and no merchant

worthy of the name would ever stand by and let a coin be treated so poorly.

What can I say? My parents were big on fiscal responsibility. Neither my sister nor I went into the family business (she's a waitress) but hey, it's in our blood. The bisection of a gold piece triggered indignation from deep, deep within me.

"Wait!" Gourry protested. "No more hitting! If the coin I cut's still useful, am I forgiven?"

"Sure. But how?"

Gourry sat on the floor and picked up both pieces as Lantz and I watched.

"I'll come up with something," he promised. "I split this pretty good, if I do say so myself."

"Yeah, we're all impressed. Now—"

"You know, I don't usually show off to people like that," he interrupted, "but Lantz, how'd you like this for a lucky charm? Say fifty leebs."

A leeb is worth a tenth of a gold piece.

Seems Gourry has a little merchant blood somewhere in him, too.

"Sold." Lantz glared at me with enmity as he placed the cut gold piece in his pocket with the utmost care.

"What can *you* do?" he asked. "I assume you've got some skills to back up the way you treat big bro, here. Or maybe you're just a

little toy, brought along for show?"

*A toy?!*

"Oh, I'll show you what I can do, allllll right!!!" And I began chanting a spell.

"Daaaaah! Stop! Lina! I'm begging, could you please, stop!" In an act of supreme mercy, I stopped casting my Dragon Slave spell. But only after listening to Gourry's pathetic, heartfelt pleas.

*You were this close, buddy.*

"If I'd known it was gonna be so crowded around here…" I muttered as I moved on, determined to continue our inspection.

Lantz gave me a look like, "Yeah, right."

Grrr.

* * *

We finished inspecting the Tarim mansion and moved on to exploring the city. Lantz, who'd taken quite a liking to Gourry, was playing tour guide.

Apparently, everything beyond the marketplace was considered "downtown." And back where we were—close to the castle—things were pretty quiet during the day.

"We're here, big bro," Lantz said, and stopped.

Stately mansions surrounded us. The one that Lantz was pointing to was very much like the Tarim residence, but bigger. It was only three stories high, but its massive breadth made Tarim's

seem cramped by comparison.

"So this is it… Gourry sighed.

"The Daymia residence," Lantz whispered ominously.

"Why's it so big?" I wondered aloud.

"Do I look like an information desk to you?" Lantz snapped at me.

*What's with that attitude?!*

He *was* holding a grudge! I knew it!

"Er, Lina…" Gourry stammered, trying to distract me before I started a fight.

"You wanna go check it out?" I asked.

Both men raised their eyebrows simultaneously.

"Check *what* out?"

"Daymia's place." *Duh.*

"No!" Lantz shrieked like a girl. "Are you serious?! We can't break into someone's house in broad daylight!"

"Now, who said anything about breaking in?" I replied. "We'll go in through the front door like civilized folk and have a little chat. If we're polite, they have to behave reasonably or else the neighbors will catch wind of it. We'll be fine."

"Uh, I'm not so sure about this," Gourry said, folding his arms. "According to Mr. Tarim, Daymia's not a fair-and-square kind of guy. And if something does happen, the city will definitely take the

word of a respectable citizen over us, and we'll look like the bad guys."

"Mmmm…" I sounded through closed lips. I was a little surprised to hear Gourry laying it out so thoroughly. I'd almost forgotten he could contribute sharp insights from time to time.

"Good point," I reluctantly conceded. We were going to have to come up with another plan. "Okay, let's keep going. Next up: Chairman Halcyform's place…"

Knock, knock. I used the dragon-head door knocker twice. It was pretty cool.

Mr. Tarim had said that an assistant named Rubia was still living in the chairman's desolate mansion, on the off chance that he might return.

*Surely she must know something, right?*

No answer.

"Maybe she's not home?" I looked up, quietly admiring the architecture.

"Yes?" At last a voice came from inside the house.

*Wait a second! That voice…*

She unlocked the door, and when she opened it, I couldn't help but stare.

*Hair the color of the setting sun, eyes filled with sadness…*

It was her—the girl I'd met on the street. The one who told me

not to get involved, then vanished. Yes, it was definitely her.

She opened the door and regarded us with undisguised suspicion.

"What may I do for you?" she asked, as if we'd never met before.

*Oh, so that's how it is, huh? Well, two can play that game.*

"Miss Rubia, is it?"

She nodded.

"A pleasure to meet you. We're investigating the chairman's disappearance…" I lied to her face.

Her expression changed ever so slightly. "I've told the Guild Council everything I know. I have nothing more to say. Please leave me in peace," she said, and started to close the door.

"Just one question!" I barked out, thrusting my shoe in the doorway. I came to get a real answer to the question that left Mr. Tarim speechless and I wasn't leaving without a lead. "What was the chairman researching?"

She shuddered. It was exactly the same reaction that Mr. Tarim had.

For a moment, she looked directly at me. "Life… research. I can say no more." She dislodged my foot and slammed the door.

"What's with that woman?!" Lantz said, a pout on his face.

*In peace, huh?*

"What are you grinning about?" Gourry asked.

“Oh, nothing…” My mantle fluttered. “It’s just that… this is getting interesting.”

* * *

I tossed and turned insufferably.

I was crashed out in one of Mr. Tarim’s guest rooms. Gourry and I were supposed to be taking turns resting while our things were being stored at an inn, but I was having a hard time getting any shuteye.

Assassins prefer to operate at night, for obvious reasons. So bodyguards can’t exactly take the night off and get the job done. As for why we left our things at the inn? Well, as long as we were under contract, protecting Mr. Tarim had to be our top priority. If, for example, his mansion caught on fire, we’d never be able to escort him out and keep our belongings safe.

It may seem like a silly precaution, but among my possessions were various irreplaceable magical items— priceless objects for any traveling adventurer. It was one thing to sell my services, but quite another to put my entire livelihood on the line. Sorcery’s an expensive business!

Of course, the inn where I left my possessions could always burn down, but you’ll go crazy trying to prevent every remote possibility.

Anyway, it wasn’t concern over my belongings that disturbed my sleep. It was… a premonition, of sorts. I get them sometimes. That’s just how it is.

I was tired, but I couldn’t stay asleep for long. I felt certain that

assassins were going to strike that night—and I was right!

I awoke atop the covers in a fairly extravagant single bedroom. It was a little too extravagant for a guard, perhaps, but Mr. Tarim laughed it off, calling himself a "hedonist." Gourry was sleeping with the other men when he wasn't out on watch.

I got out of bed and found my slippers. My clothes were about the same as during the day, except that I'd left my mantle by my bedside, since it would have interfered with my already-elusive sleep.

I was fully prepared to deal with intruders at any time.

Just to be on the safe side, I took my sword out of my sword belt and left the room.

It wasn't that I'd noticed anything suspicious; I just had to use the bathroom.

A number of men were sleeping in the corridor. Whether standing or lying on their sides with blankets over them or on guard duty their swords never left them.

I made my way down the hall, careful not to step on anyone.

Though it was fairly warm during the day, Atlas City nights were chilly enough to require a mantle. No point putting it on for such a short jaunt, though.

"Brrr… cold…" I grumbled, and stopped. I'd noticed a suspicious silhouette against a nearby door. Somewhere out back, a hinge squeaked. There was a strange presence closing in.

Scratch that. It wasn't a presence, exactly. More like an ambiance.

About ten men were standing guard outside, but of course, they didn't notice anything unusual. Something more than the cold gave me goose bumps. I sensed some kind of alien aura outside the door.

A moment later, an icy sensation crept up my spine, telling me to run.

*There!*

I heard a sound. Something like scraping metal—that was enough.

"Rise and shine! Everybody up! We're under attack! This is not a drill, boys!"

After rousing the men, I shot outside through the nearest door. I could smell blood in the air. The casualties came quickly. Naked blades danced in the darkness, lit only by sparks and moonlight.

When fighting in the dark, the most fearsome threat is one's own allies. There could be no "Oops, sorry" for anyone attacking Gourry or Rod by mistake. I chanted several lighting spells over the area.

Then, I saw them: the grotesque band of assassins making the attack.

There were ten giants in all. I don't mean *giant* as in tall, either; the problem was their bulk. Their arms were every bit as wide as my waist. With that kind of muscle power, they could swing maces as heavy as carts in one hand and wield executioner's swords in the other. Imagine how effective that kind of strength is in battle. I

didn’t think we could physically take these guys.

The strangest part was that every one of them had the exact same face. They were all about twenty-two years old, and not one had a hair on his head. Their faces were entirely expressionless. No joy, no rage, no nothing.

If I had to guess, they were combat homunculi constructed by Daymia.

Just as Mr. Tarim had suggested, if someone in the practice of constructing drones like these were to become chairman, Atlas City would fall into ill repute in every corner of the world—from Zephilia in the north to the Keln Federation in the south! But I didn’t have time to ponder the consequences just then.

Those giants weren’t the only ones in the room set on bringing carnage. The red dots I’d seen glowing in the darkness were revealed under the lighting spell to be the cruel eyes of huge wolves covered in velvet scales and countless thick spines. Between the wolves and the drones, our enemies numbered fourteen.

In number, our side had the advantage; we were at a horrific disadvantage, however, in brute force. The might and morale of mercenaries working for a little extra pocket change was no match for that of an enemy who lived only to wage war.

No matter how many reinforcements came from inside the mansion, Daymia’s grotesques would not show fear, nor would they retreat.

Of course, we had a few worthy warriors on our side. Rod

emerged from the darkness at a full sprint. With one hand drawing the sword off his back, he charged the lead giant. As the drone responded, bringing his great sword to the front, Rod abruptly changed course, attacking the giant's right flank.

The executioner's sword futilely sliced through air, while Rod's naked blade lashed out from his back—the glitter of lighting spells reflecting off it like faerie dust. The two men passed one another; the giant's mace made a heavy sound as it rolled onto the ground, and fresh blood spurted from his side. In a single pass, Rod had severed the giant's mace-wielding arm and dug a deep crevasse in his flank. However…

The giant howled and raised his sword up once more. Though his wound was deep, he neither shrieked nor flinched, but commenced with his counterattack. *Is it possible that he can't feel pain? Can't grieve his missing limb?*

As the giant made a single swinging attack at head height, Rod ducked into a crouch, then sprang up in an elegant motion, his blade now glistening with blood. The giant's body cleaved in two from a single, vertical cut.

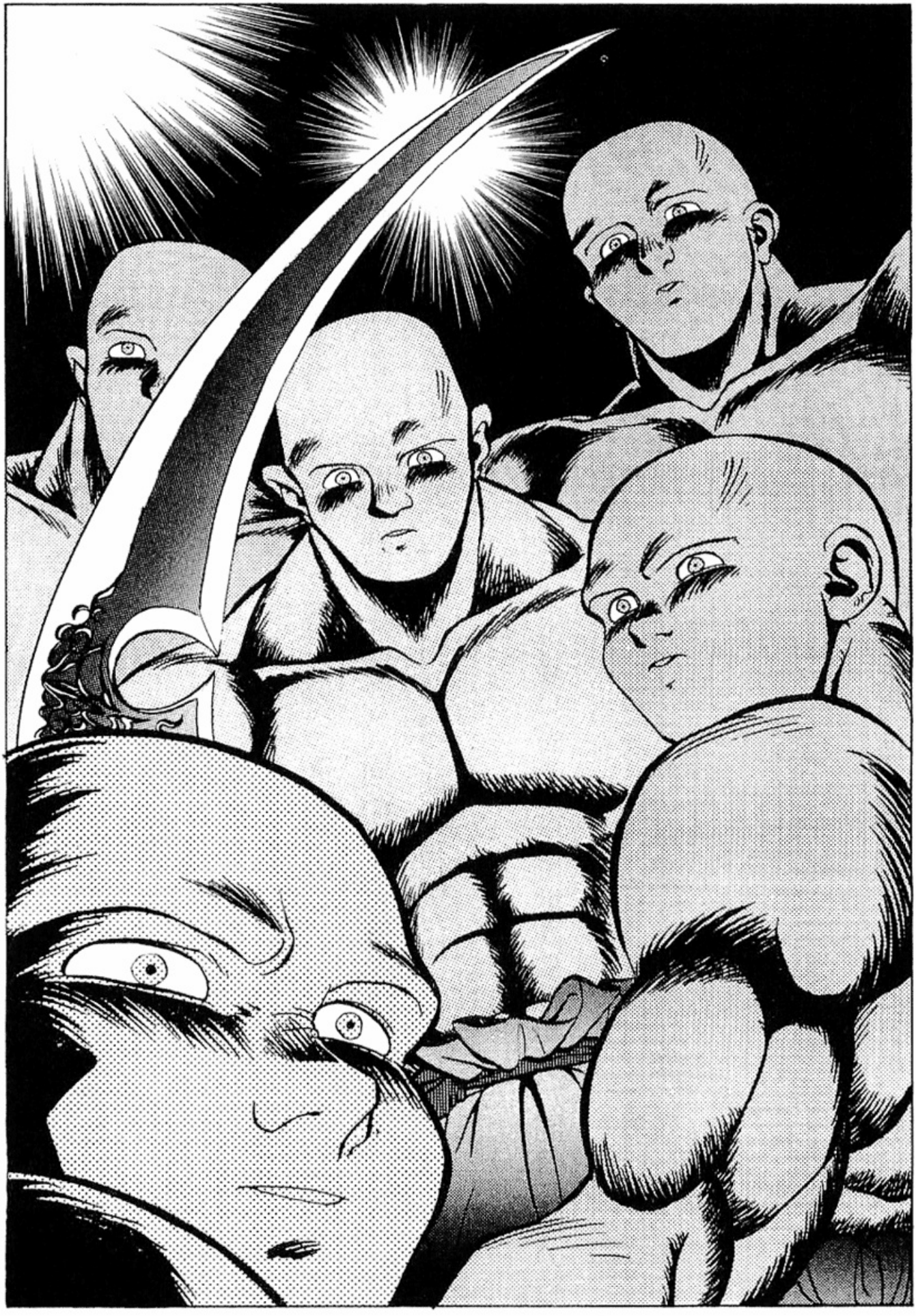
Gourry entered the fray, drawing his long sword lazily and choosing his first opponent seemingly at random. The unlucky drone raised his sword. Twin silver flashes blurred together in a chorus of clicks and clacks. At the first opening, Gourry hacked his blade through the giant's forehead to deep into his chest.

The now-corpse trembled, then collapsed.

"Whoa there!" Gourry bounced back, startled. Something shot

through the air, headed for his face. Gourry's sword glittered again, shunting it down to the ground. It was a small spike.

The velvet scale-covered wolf had projected one of its spines like an arrow. The wolf (Was it a wolf?) breathed deeply, gathering its strength for another volley of attacks.



A moment later, a storm of spines rained toward Gourry. The average soldier would have been a pincushion. Happily, Gourry was well above average.

"Uh-uhhh!" he yelled as he hit the ground and rolled to evade the attack. Once clear, he hopped to his feet and sprinted toward the wolf.

It sucked in its breath once more.

Gourry, determined not to give it a second chance, stared it in the eye—almost as if to say goodbye—and then dipped between its knees, shooting up with sword in flesh, bisecting its body with a long, slow pull.

The wolf popped like a balloon as it blew apart in all directions.

Lantz was a more capable soldier than I expected. He charged straight for the throat of one of the giants, holding his bastard sword with two hands. His weapon met his enemy's with a shrill scream. Spinning away from the clashing swords, Lantz lunged just inside the giant's reach. His right hand released the sword, and with his left, he slammed it up into his opponent's lower jaw. The giant's head snapped back noiselessly. Lantz stepped forward.

A moment before the giant could regain his poise, Lantz clipped him from the side. The blow hit home. The drone buckled where he stood, tumbling to his knees. Lantz finished him off with a single thrust through his brain, and, just for good measure, moved behind and used the hilt of his sword to pound his hindbrain into soup.

Lantz's style mixed classic sword fighting with bareknuckle beer

brawling.

“C’mon, you bastards!” Lantz screamed. “Let’s have ourselves a dance, shall we?!” As Lantz shouted his weird war cry, a wolf stepped up to block his path.

“I was—uh—talking to the other fellas, actually. The giants…” Lantz muttered under his breath.

Of course, I wasn’t just standing around watching while all of this was going down. I might have liked to, but the assassins wouldn’t let me. One of the wolves standing near me began a long inhale.

*Not good!*

I frantically searched for just the right spell, while the wolf fired every spine on its body in a single volley!

“Diem Wing!” I shouted, and the air condensed around me, sending a shock wave back toward the wolf. It was just a weak wind spell—not even strong enough to knock an opponent off balance—but it was powerful enough to shoo the spines back from whence they came. With only the scars of its spines remaining, all the wolf could do was whine and gawk.

“C’mon!”

“There!”

“Take that! And that! And that!”

A squad of allied mercenaries released their fear and fury on the impotent wolf with a flurry of gashes and kicks.

While observing that charming spectacle, I caught sight of an errant shadow—a giant behind me! I spun aside, escaping the fall of the executioner's sword by the width of a hair. That pissed me off.

*Take this, you backstabbing cheater!*

I began casting a counterattack. Crouched and pressing my palms to the earth, I chanted, "Bephis Bring!"

It was a spell originally used to call upon an earth spirit to dig a tunnel. I cast it directly under the giant's feet.

In the next moment, his form was sucked into a deep hole, his hands clawing toward the sky. The hole wasn't deep enough for the fall to kill him. However, neither was it shallow enough for him to climb back out.

"You guys take this one from here!" I yelled to a couple of nearby mercenaries.

"You got it!" they shouted back.

I didn't know whether they'd stone him to death or douse him in oil and light him up, but if I'd had time, I'm pretty sure I would have felt sorry for the big dumb drone.

Just as that thought entered and left my mind, I felt someone watching me—I turned.

I could just make out a silhouette of a figure leaning against a white wall near the main gate. It was wearing a white mask.

*Seigram!*

I took off toward the white-masked Mazoku.

“So, you have chosen to disregard our message? Just as well… ,” Seigram muttered quietly.

I stopped directly in front of him and noticed something I’d missed before. Sensing it, I could feel my insides shrivel.

Maybe it was because I’d been the tiniest bit drunk the night before, but I’d somehow failed to realize during our first encounter that this demon foe before me was of a rather high rank.

I’d imagined that I’d beat Seigram easily—by virtue of superior power. But now? For a mountain of reasons, I figured I might be lucky enough to scrape by with a win.

Of course, I was sure I could obliterate Seigram with my secret spell. But that was dangerous… and a little excessive.

If I did use it, I stood a good chance of turning Atlas City into a crater. I’d have been fine if I could have used the anti-individual attack spell, Ra Tilt—which destroys an opponent from the astral side—but I couldn’t use that spell. That is to say, I hadn’t studied it!

See, I was never in a position to use it before, and… well… it wasn’t very showy! Dragon Slave was so much flashier; I learned that one instead

*No time for regrets now! I have to do this, one way or another!*

“So, half-mask took the day off?” I asked. I was fairly sure the one called Gio was around here somewhere, but I couldn’t see him.

“Gio Gaia. It is not my place to participate in this. I have been ordered merely to observe the results of this battle.”

“By Daymia the Blue, huh?”

Seigram responded to my words with silence.

While summoning Gio didn't require much talent, summoning a demon like Seigram—that required a sorcerer who was more than passably competent.

We stared at each other in silence.

*Who goes first?*

Cold sweat dripped down my back. Then…

"Need a hand?" A completely unconcerned voice called out from behind me. I knew who it was, even without turning.

"How's it going over there, Gourry?" I asked, as I continued to stare at Seigram.

"Oh, Rod's over there, so they'll manage without me. Plus, you got yourself a demon person here."

*A demon person? Nice phraseology.*

I backed up a bit so that I was standing beside him.

"And you came to help li'l ol' me? Why, Gourry, you're too kind."

Even if I couldn't use the big stuff, Gourry's weapon was a fair bit of firepower. But before I could mentally hammer out a plan…

"I regret that I cannot cross swords with you at this time," Seigram purred calmly.

"You what—?" Gourry and I responded simultaneously.

"I've been ordered to observe the outcome of this battle. As I

have not been ordered to fight you, I have neither reason nor intention to do so."

"What the hell are you saying?" I yelled, spitting mad. "You come here, launch a surprise attack on us with berserk homunculi and chimera wolves, and then you have the balls to say you don't want a fight?! Well, maybe you don t, but *we* sure as hell do!"

"I see. Then I have no choice," said Seigram, as he took a single step forward. Gourry and I instinctively took a step backward. Then…

The white-masked Mazoku leapt from the ground and rose into the sky. In the next instant, his form vanished altogether.

He'd tricked us with a feint and made an easy escape!

"Oh, no you didn't!" I dove through the gateway, following that black mantle.

"Hey! Lina, wait!" Gourry called after me and then joined in the chase.

We were making our pursuit in the dead of night. Silence ruled the city. With clouds covering the moon, the only light came from enchanted lamps and ambient lighting spells.

Seigram swam rapidly through the cold nighttime air. His mantle somehow made no sound as it fluttered.

All Gourry and I could hear was our footsteps and the steady rhythm of our own breath. A thought occurred to me unexpectedly as I was absorbed by the chase: It was like trying to catch a dream.

The Mazoku didn't melt into the darkness like he had the night before. Perhaps he'd figured that while our abilities might be a match for Gio, we were nowhere near his threat level. Or perhaps…

He was luring us somewhere. *A trap?*

Maybe Gourry was thinking the same thing… or maybe nothing at all. I couldn't tell from his expression either way.

The path Seigram chose was odd. Rather than try to lose us in the alleyways, he fled down a main road.

Then I got it.

*We're headed for Daymia the Blue!*

Seigram's form vanished as the silhouette of a mammoth old mansion rose up before our eyes.

*Just as I thought… the estate of Daymia the Blue!*

Though there were no guards on duty in the comparatively small courtyard, quite a bit of light filtered out through the mansion's windows.

I didn't like it. It was too predictable. Anyone would see this as a clear and obvious trap.

"I thought we'd end up here," I said to Gourry.

"You know this place?"

*Groan…*

I fell to my knees at Gourry's reply. "You were here during the day today, you dolt! Remember? Lantz was showing us around?"

“Really?” He crossed his arms, deep in thought. “Huh. Things sure look different at night, don’t they?” he asked in complete seriousness. “So… what is this place, anyway?”

“D-a-y-m-i-a-’s P-l-a-c-e,” I said slowly, through a jaw clenched tight.

“Ah ha!” Gourry audibly palmed his fist. “Just as I thought!”

“Do you think this is funny? Is that it? Are you trying to play some kind of weirdo practical joke on me? Because seriously, Gourry, I’m not in the mood… now, let’s go!”

“Go where?”

*Someone else be his partner for me! Please?!*

“D-a-y-m-i-a-’s P-l-a-c-e,” I replied, on the verge of exploding.

“Uh, but—” Gourry started with a serious look on his face. “I think this is a trap.”

“I know that!” I yelled back. “Of course it’s a trap! But trap or no trap, led here or not, we don’t know what their intentions are, now do we?! And there’s only one way to find out! Maybe it looks stupid to you, but letting fear and caution dictate our every move strikes me as a lot more stupid!” I rose indignantly to my feet and ranted over my shoulder as I walked off.

Gourry laid a hand gently on that same shoulder.

*Huh…?*

“Lina…” He gazed deep into my eyes and spoke in a quiet voice.

*N-now wait just a minute. He should be losing his cool, not getting all serious on me like this.*

"Now, Lina. I want you to listen good…"

"Wh-what? What are you doing getting all… serious?" Even I could hear the nervousness in my voice.

"Lina, listen to me: Making a big ruckus at night is going to get us in trouble with the neighbors."

My silent punch exploded into his jaw.

*Smartass.*

* * *

"So, for sure it's a trap?"

"Yeah… it's a trap."

We exchanged witty banter while moving through a deserted corridor, keeping our voices low. We'd made it inside Daymia's premises, but based on the lights we'd seen from outside, we were pretty certain that the guards had been pulled back in for an ambush. Yet…

We hadn't seen a soul.

A row of doors flanked the corridor. They probably lead to the guards' bunks. We opened some of the doors, but we only found simple storage cubes.

If Daymia were capable of sending assassins like *that* after us, would he be stupid enough to leave his place unsecured?

Of course not.

That left only one possibility: We were being led… somewhere.

We wandered around for so long that a strange thing happened: I started to get bored. You'd think that we would have arrived somewhere for something at some point, but that mansion was just one huge maze.

It looked big enough from outside, but now that we were actually snaking our way through it, it was even more insane than we'd thought.

The first strange thing I noticed was that the stairs just inside the entrance went straight up to the third story attic. People don't build houses like that. Sane people don't, anyway.

Of course, sane people don't build homunculus armies, either.

In any case, after wandering around for an incredibly anticlimactic period of time, we finally came to a huge, metal-plated door of a ward with a pentagram inscribed onto it. It was obviously a room used for conducting magic.

I sensed a human presence on the other side.

"This… it?" Gourry inquired in a low voice.

"This is it," I replied. "I know it's a trap, so we're going in. You ready?"

"No reason I would be…"

I glared at him. "Don't back out on me now!"

“Why should I keep following you to hell and back on your every whim?”

“Because it’s good for your blood to do something injudicious every once in a while?”

“You call this injudicious?!”

“Not bad,” I replied with admiration. “You don’t know what injudicious means, do you?”

“No! I don’t! But I thought I could fake it.”

“Okay, shhh…” I said in a small voice. It wasn’t a good time or place to be making a fuss.

“Look, are you with me on this or not?”

“Not! We can’t mess this up, Lina.”

“Are you calling me reckless?!”

“Well, yeah! All right: What’s the first thing you’re gonna do when I open this door?”

“I dunno. Maybe toss in a couple of fireballs?”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about! First of all, we might have this thing all wrong—”

“I know that! Look, Tarim had an odd reaction when I brought up Chairman Halcyform, right? Well, I’m going to have to talk to Daymia to find out what Tarim’s hiding!”

“Really?” He stared at me dumbfounded. “I-I really wish you’d said that earlier.”

*Sheesh, we can't back down after coming this far!*

"Shhh, Gourry!"

"What?"

I pressed my ear to the door.

"What is it?" He didn't seem to know what I was up to.

"Our only option is to go right in."

"Now?!" He looked around nervously, but there was nothing to see. The only presence was the one behind that door.

He looked at me with doubt in his eyes.

"All right, if you're sure. Let's go!" he said, and kicked the door in.

See? Him and me? We're joined at the hip.

Gourry's eyes narrowed.

The two of us stood in the doorway, side by side.

It was like peering into an enormous circus tent. The room was humongous and perfectly round. It probably accounted for half the mansion's size! A giant warding pentagram was inscribed on the floor, the tip of its star pointing north.

*A Rune Breaker…*

Pentagrams are used to create a field that interferes with and weakens all magical power within it. A characteristic peculiar to this spell is that the field's power increases not only in proportion to the skill of the spellcaster, but also, to the overall size of the field.

In other words, if it were big enough, a ward could even seal *my* powers, no matter how amateur the sorcerer who created it. Of course—not that I'm bragging, but— even at that size, I wasn't exactly shaking in my boots.

There was some kind of altar on the opposite side of the room, and a lone man stood before it, a creepy-crazy smile slashed across his face. He was balding, with dark hair and a mustache. He had big, shifty eyes that were constantly in motion, and—*he wore a blue mantle.*

"Mr. Daymia, I presume?" As I called out to him, the man recoiled.

"Tarim's assassins!" His already-large eyes popped wide open as he shrieked at a deafening pitch. We both flinched.

"Well, uh… I suppose we *are* in a manner of speaking," Gourry frankly—and stupidly—replied.

"I knew it! Ha! I*knew* he would, that toad! From the very beginning, I knew he meant to kill me as soon as I'd done it!" Daymia continued. "I knew it, I knew it! I knew it from the very start! From the word *go!* Did he really think I wouldn't know?!"

Gourry and I exchanged glances.

*Uh…*

"This guy's a nut job," I whispered.

"Hey, you're the one who got us into this! *You're* the one who took the job!" Gourry responded supportively.

On the other side of the room, Daymia continued with his maniacal rant, eyes bulging, teeth grinding—yet still smiling. Seriously, he was scary.

*But…*

One thing Daymia said bothered me: "I knew he meant to kill me as soon as I'd done it!"

*After he did what?*

"Wait! We have no intention of hurting you!" I shouted. As hopeless as it seemed, I needed to press for more details.

Daymia stopped speaking and stared at both of us.

"Freak… show," Gourry muttered in a sing-song manner. Then he made that little whistling noise that sounds like "cuckoo, cuckoo." I ignored him.

"You're not assassins?" Daymia asked, turning his bugged-out frog eyes our way.

"That's right. We are not assassins."

After a pause, Daymia began to laugh his crazy-person laugh once more.

"I see. I see, I see then—I know!! I understand completely! I you're not Tarim's assassins, then—you're here to steal my pretty chimeras!"

*Uh… nope.*

"Well, try as you might, you will *not* have them! They are *my*

precious children! You will not have them! You will not!!"

*Um… Earth to crazy guy…*

"Mister! We are not here to steal your chimeras either!"

"You're… not?" Daymia took a long, hard look at us once again. Then again with the laughing.

*Oy.*

"I see—ha HA!—I know! If you're not robbers, then you must be —Tarim's assassins!"

*Aaaaaahh!* I held my head in both hands.

"So much for the talk-to-him plan," Gourry said grimly. "Yeah, my bad," I replied. "Okay, we're going to have to capture him. We can ask him about stuff later. Go easy on him, okay?"

"Me? I'm always easy. *You* go easy on him."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," I said, waving and stepping forward. Daymia recoiled abruptly. "S-s-stay back! Don't come any closer! D-d-do you intend to harm the f-f-flesh of Daymia the Blue?! You shall not! You shall do no such thing!" *How come nothing is ever easy, huh*?

We continued to the other side of the room, ignoring his pleas and threats and… psychotic babbling.

"Stay back! If you come any closer, just one step closer, I'll…"

"And if we do? Then what? What are you gonna do about it, huh?"

"Th-th-this!" Daymia grabbed a rope and pulled.

THWOOP! The giant magic symbol beneath our feet quickly became a giant, magic symbol-shaped hole in the ground. Oops.

"Uh-oh…"

*Oh! Now I get it!*

"Lina!" Gourry shouted. He grabbed onto me as we fell into the abyss.

"Use your magic!" he shouted.

Like I hadn't thought of that! I'd already started.

"Levitation!" I exclaimed.

My levitation spell could normally lift a fully loaded wagon without a problem. Although Daymia's ward had dampened some of my power, the effect shouldn't have been too severe. Our fall would have quickly come to a… uh… *How come we're not stopping?*

We weren't exactly in a freefall, but we were definitely still falling, descending into a pit so deep that it seemed as if there were no bottom.

"Hello, Lina! We're still falling!"

"I know that! Don't worry!" I'd already guessed the reason, but now was not the time to explain. "It's enough for one person's weight!" I said.

Horror spread over Gourry's face. He hugged me tightly, squishing my breasts.

"Hey, now! Don't get fresh!"

“Lina! Let’s die together!!”

“What?! I was kidding, Gourry. Jeez! Just—hey! Don’t do tha—whaaaaa!”

My midair balance was thrown off; we were definitely plunging full-speed into the darkness below.

KER-SPLOOSH! With that great watery trumpet, an enormou wave rose up… I think.

I’m guessing, because by that time, I had lost consciousness.

# What Sleeps in the Sea Below

"Oh, ow…" I moaned, as I made my way toward consciousness.

"Morning, sunshine," I heard Gourry say, but I was barely able to make out his silhouette in the darkness.

"Mmmm… hold that thought." Still groggy, I brought my hands together in front of my chest and shouted, "Light!"

A faintly glowing orb formed between my palms. I tossed it into the darkness. From what little I could make out of our surroundings, we were atop one of five pillars rising out of a giant, water-filled room. It was roughly the same size and shape as the room from which we'd fallen, and the pillars were spaced such that each corresponded to a point on the pentagram in the room above. It was too dark to tell how deep the pool around us was.

"Rune Breaker," I muttered, frowning.

"Huh? What's that?" Gourry asked.

"Simply put, my power is diminished inside this field. That's why that levitation spell didn't work when we were falling."

Originally, Rune Breakers were designed to reduce the damage caused by offensive spells, weaken curses, that kind of thing. They don't usually sweat the small stuff, like levitation spells. My best guess was that the two chambers above and below ground had combined to multiply their effects exponentially, to the point that they interfered with and absorbed all types of magic. Even the

radiance of the lighting spell I'd just cast was weaker than usual.

I guess Daymia didn't make vice chairman for nothing.

"Huh. Sounds like we got ourselves a sticky wicket," observed Gourry.

*Sticky wicket, indeed.*

"So I guess we need to destroy the field, right?" Gourry said, like it was easy.

I sighed deeply. Sure, it would be nice if we could break the pentagram, thereby destroying the Rune

Breaker… it would also be nice if someone would toss us down a rope, but I wasn't going to hold my breath for either one.

"Well, yeah. But to do that we'd need to destroy these five pillars, get it?"

"You can do that with your magic."

*One of these days, Gourry…*

"Have you been listening at all?"

"What…?"

"I told you, my magic's weak here! I can't do that sort of thing right now. That's the whole point!"

"Oh, I was wondering if there was a point to all that." Gaaaaaaaaah! I seriously thought I was going to pop a blood vessel, right then and there.

"What's the matter? You got a headache?"

“No,” I sighed as I stood, a fair bit of water dripping from my clothes. We were both pretty wet, but my layers weren’t completely soaked through, meaning I couldn’t have been underwater too terribly long.

“We have to do something about these clothes,” Gourry said, shivering.

“Good point. We sit around like this much longer, and we’ll catch colds.”

“Yeah. So…” Gourry started, smiling. “Think we should strip and cuddle for body heat?”

*Oh, in your dreams!*

I pressed my palms together and started chanting. Gourry’s face turned a funny color—the color of fear.

“H-hey now, Lina, wait! I was kidding! It was a joke, I swear! Look, I take it back, o-okay,” Gourry shuddered.

“Fireball!” I shouted, launching a bright orb of steel-melting heat straight into Gourry’s chest, striking squarely and exploding! Or, that was what *he* thought, anyway.

“Aaaaaaarrghhh!” He cried out as his body was enveloped in heat. Then, when he realized he wasn’t dead, he stopped and stared down at his torso like he wasn’t sure it should still be there.

My fireball could normally melt steel, sure, but inside the Rune Breaker, it did little more than heat the air.

“Your clothes are dry now, aren’t they?” I laughed.

*Boy, I crack myself up sometimes.*

"Okay, now that *that's* taken care of…" I said, turning my eyes skyward. We needed a plan.

"Any bright ideas?" Gourry asked uneasily.

*Bright ideas. Ha ha, I get it. Don't tempt me to do it again, Gourry.*

"Hmmm, not yet. This is a tough one," I said, thinking out loud. It looked like the hole we'd fallen through had closed. The lighting spell wasn't radiant enough for me to make out the details, but it was clear that everything above us was pitch black.

"Okay, so we can't destroy the ward," Gourry muttered. His gaze shifted to the pool around us. "I wonder how deep that thing is. What's it here for, anyway?"

"Daymia's probably a water person," I said, realizing as soon as I'd said it that Gourry wouldn't get it.

"Huh?"

See, I knew he wouldn't get it.

Okay, how to explain this… hmmm…

"Well, you know how some people are cat people and some people are dog people?" I asked.

"Yeah," Gourry nodded, with me so far.

"Well, some sorcerers have an affinity for fire, and others have an affinity for water, see? It's a lot like the cat-dog thing."

Though I limited my explanation to the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—used in Shamanic Magic, the same principle can apply to Black Magic, curses, Astral Side Shamanic Magic, and even White

Magic. But explaining all that would just confuse him, so I kept it simple.

"So, when a sorcerer with an affinity for water uses water-related spells, the effects are more powerful—it's like they're kicked up a notch."

"So when you say, 'Daymia's a water person,' you mean, 'he has an affinity for water,'" Gourry clarified.

"Yes. When a person uses some spell or other, if it's related to his personal element, the spell's power increases. Or, they could make an effort to include the element—like putting water over a ward to amplify it."

"Huh…" Gourry folded his arms. "So you're saying when Daymia made this ward to weaken magic, he used this water to make the effects even stronger?"

I nodded heavily. "Yep. But this is all speculation. The real question is what to *do* about this water."

I cast another lighting spell, tossing the orb of light through the water's surface.

"What the—?" Gourry gasped as the orb broke the water's surface. As the light flickered and shone underwater, he looked to me for an explanation.

“You’re wondering why the water isn’t putting it out, aren’t you?”

“Uh… yeah, pretty much.” He nodded.

*“A* lamp has a burning flame inside it, so it produces both light and heat. However, lighting spells are made of magic. There are no flames of any kind, so water can’t put them out.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool,” he said, crossing his arms and gazing into the pool. “Oh, holy crap.”

*My thoughts exactly.*

That pool was deep—I mean really, *really* deep. It wasn’t packed with piranhas or anything, but it didn’t need to be.

At the very bottom of the pool, we could make out the outline of the ward’s pattern. And in the very center…

“Hey, what’s that there?” Gourry asked, pointing at what looked like some sort of jewel in the center of the ward. It was emerald and had something inside of it, but because the water distorted the image, we couldn’t make out any more than a wavy shadow.

“I’m not sure,” I replied, and the two of us stared at it in silence.

Finally, Gourry spoke: “Am I crazy, or does it look like there’s a person in there?”

“Maybe?” I hadn’t seen it until he’d pointed it out, but now that Gourry’d said so, it did look kind of like a person.

“Yeah, it definitely looks like a silhouette to me,” Gourry said, becoming more certain by the moment.

Gotta hand it to him; he's got pretty good eyes. I'm confident in my powers of observation, but I couldn't pick out anything more than a dark shadow until he'd pointed it out.

"We need to find out for sure. If it is a person, I have a hunch as to *why* it's in the center of the ward like that," I said.

"How do we find out for sure?" Gourry asked.

"Like this…" I said, and booted him from behind.

"Dwaaa! Aahh!" he shouted as he tumbled.

Ker-sploosh! He made a satisfying splash as he hit the water.

"Hey! What did you do that for?!" he cried out as he resurfaced and cleared the water out of his nose.

*Heh heh.*

I squatted on the edge of the pillar, giggling as I looked down on him, and said, "I was hoping you'd jump in and check it out for me, Gourry. Thanks! I really hate getting wet."

"Ho ho ho," I laughed, nearly busting a gut, until…

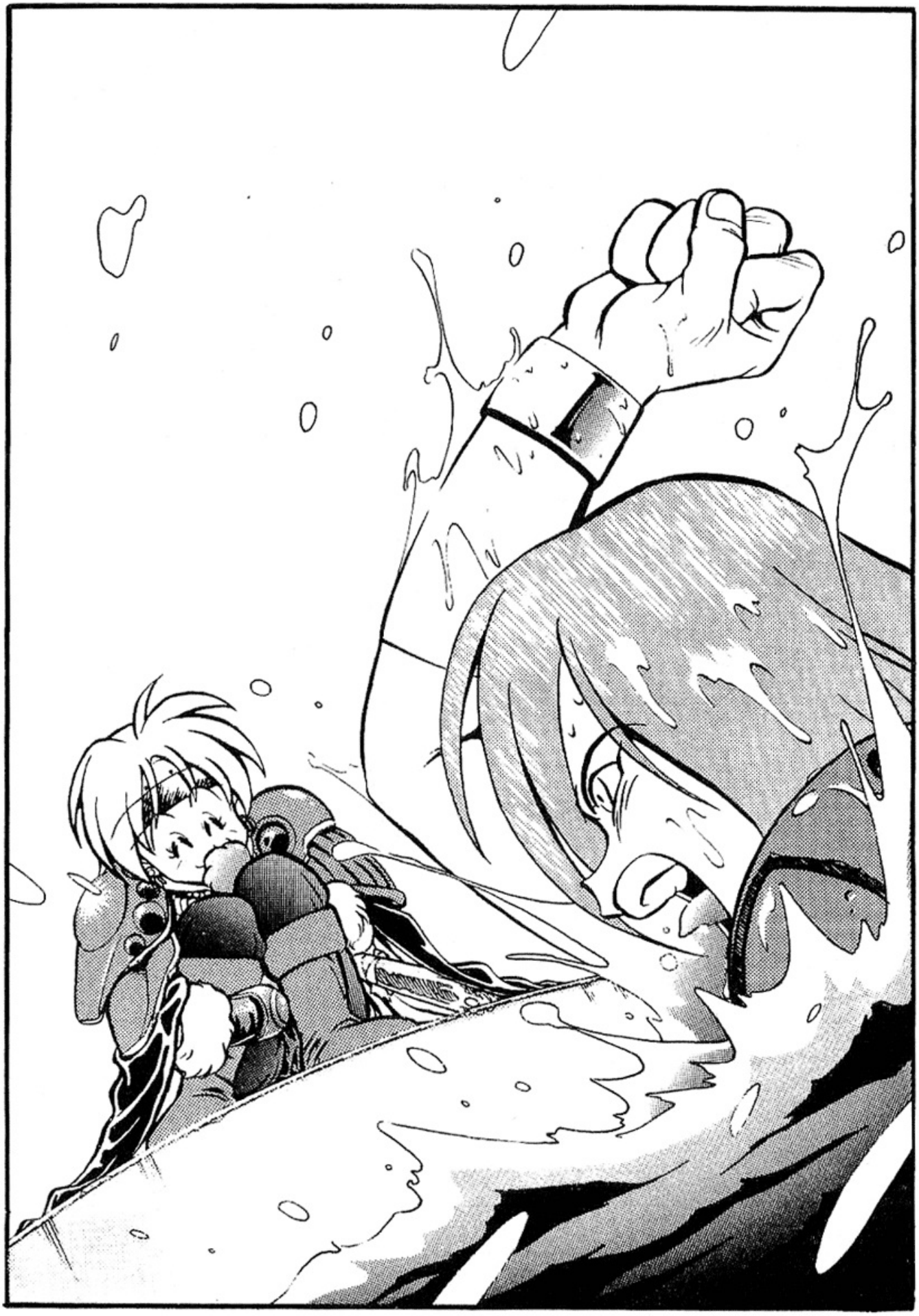
"Uh, waaah…!"

Gourry heaved himself up and grabbed my foot.

Sploosh!

I plunged deep into the water, reflexively sucking the liquid into my mouth, and then… lights out.

* * *



"Uh… uh… ugh…" I convulsed two or three times as I came to.

"Morning, sunshine," Gourry said for the second time.

"What the hell did you do that for?!" I demanded.

"Hey, you don't have any right to talk—you started it! But…" He turned and looked away from me as he went on. "You scared me. I thought you were gonna drown, so I had to give you CPR to get you breathing again."

"You gave me wh-wh-WHAT?!" I gasped, choking on my words. CPR?! Gourry gave me mouth-to-mouth?! Blood rushed to my head. I stole a glance at Gourry's face and steeled myself to ask: "Uh… what does that mean, exactly?"

"I laid you down on your stomach and kicked you in the back."

*Whack!* I bopped him on the forehead, as was becoming my habit.

*You did what?! Is that any way to treat a lady?!*

"What? You didn't think by *CPR,* I meant mouth-to-mouth, did you?" he asked, teasing.

"No! I most certainly did not!" I replied.

"Yes, you did! You're blushing—look at you!"

"Oh, never mind, will you—a-anyway, will you please focus on the ward here?!"

His gaze shifted to the water, and he sang under his breath, "You're blush-ing, you're blush-ing…"

*Jerk.*

"All right, back to business," Gourry said, mercifully. "A person would never be able to go long enough without breathing to make it to the bottom."

"Right," I agreed. Still wet, I folded my arms and sank into thought.

"Don't you have a spell for breathing underwater?" Gourry asked.

*"A* what?"

"A spell for breathing water, I mean."

"Not one that I'd depend on under the circumstances," I said, scratching my head.

"Really?" Gourry looked both genuinely surprised and dejected.

"No, but now that I think about it, there might be another way…" I tossed him into the water once again, just for the heck of it. "Let's see if this'll actually work."

Having just dried off, I began preparing myself for an underwater adventure.

Okay, "began preparing" makes it sound a bit more involved than taking a deep breath and casting a simple spell. And really, that was all there was to it.

The way I figured it, there were two ways to go about this: The first was to cast a water element spell which would, assuming it functioned properly despite the influence of the ward, allow a person

to breathe water; or, the second option was to use a wind spell. I reasoned that I could create a field of air around myself that would travel with me as I walked underwater—like moving around inside a big soap bubble. I chose the latter, for the former had a significant disadvantage. Namely, I'd have to get wet. Again.

"Ray Wing!" I chanted, and the air began to shift around me, hugging my body and lifting me gently from the ground. A moment later, I plunged into the water with considerable speed.

The Ray Wing spell was originally developed for highspeed flight, the drawback being that it was difficult to maneuver. I determined fairly quickly that it didn't get any easier below sea level. And, of course, it didn't escape the effects of the Rune Breaker either. The wind barrier was weaker than I'd hoped, and even given the different viscosities of air and water, I was moving more slowly than I'd expected. Still, I was dry, so I had that to be happy about. If I suffocated, at least I'd die dry and smiling. (Not that I should have been treating the possibility of the air in my wind barrier running out before reaching the bottom as a laughing matter, but hey, sometimes if you don't laugh, you'll scream.) I resolved that if I noticed I was running low on air, I'd head for the surface right away.

Happily, it wasn't necessary for me to follow through on my resolution. Only moments after I'd had that thought, I arrived at my destination—the giant jewel! Looking down at it from atop that pillar, it had been difficult to gauge its size, but it was easily large enough to contain a person.

"Hmmm," I pondered it. The light from the lighting spell I'd

tossed down earlier was too faint to reach here. I cast another and tossed it nearby.

I gasped aloud at what I saw: There was, without doubt, a single man sleeping within the giant jewel… or so it seemed.

"Holy sleeping sorcerers…" I mumbled, lingering alongside it, cocooned within the Ray Wind barrier. I couldn't afford to be too relaxed, though; we were at the very core of the Rune Breaker, the place where its effectiveness was at its peak.

The man who lay inside the emerald-cast jewel had long hair, and his body was wrapped in a robe and mantle clearly indicating he was a high-ranking sorcerer. He was neither tall nor short, neither old nor young. With his eyes closed, he looked almost handsome. I couldn't make out the color of his robes through the emerald-colored filter, but a thought did occur to me…

*He couldn't be…*

I tried to put the idea out of my mind.

*But, if by some chance, this* is *him…*

I moved closer, until my wind barrier brushed against part of the emerald. At that moment…

*Who's there?* I heard a voice in my head that wasn't my own.

"Telepathy!" I said aloud.

*A woman? You… you bear me no malice, I sense… which means that you are not an ally of Tarim and Daymia.*

"H-hey, whoa now, slow down a minute!" I said aloud, trying to

parse out who was talking to me and what the heck he meant.

*There's no need to shout. I can hear your thoughts.*

I blushed at the very idea.

Telepathy is a technique whereby one transmits thoughts to another person. Vocalizing language is unnecessary around a telepathic sorcerer. Talented telepaths are born, not made—and needless to say, I wasn't one of them. So, the fellow in the jewel was using telepathy to send me his thoughts, and to hear my voice in return. Of course, it was entirely possible that his ability was not magical in nature. If it had been, I doubt he'd have been able to use it under the circumstances—at the very center of the Rune Breaker.

"So, what's going on with you and those two—Daymia and Tarim?"

For a moment, it almost looked like he was smiling.

*I apologize. I should have introduced myself immediately. I am the Atlas City Sorcerer's Guild chairman, Halcyform.*

"H-Halcyform?!" I shouted. I'd thought he couldn't be, but… I tried to quiet my thoughts and listen.

*If it pleases you, miss, may I remind you, there is no need to shout.*

"Yeah, okay, sorry about that. B-but, well, you surprised me. I mean, you disappeared half a year ago!"

*I did not disappear. I was* made *to disappear.*

"By… ?"

*Tarim and Daymia, of course.*

*WHAT?!* I'd figured Tarim was hiding something about the incident, but…

*They both had their eyes set on the position of chairman. On that day, Tarim* … He stopped.

"… Tarim did what?"

*I'm sorry, but I don't even know your name. Nor do I know how you found yourself here, in this place with me.*

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

*Ah, so you are,* he said—or thought—as though the whole thing suddenly made sense.

I explained the course of recent events to him as briefly as I could, stopping a couple of times to renew my wind barrier. "… and that's how we've come to meet here," I finished.

*I see… you give quite a psychological description, but you've explained the key elements sufficiently. It seems that you and I are both victims of Tarim's deceptions. He lured me here as well, sealing me in this strange place. He is a more cunning man than I had imagined.*

*Cunning? Sure. He ought to have something going for him. He certainly isn't a looker,* I thought to myself.

*… a looker, you say?*

*Ah, damn it!* I'd transmitted my thought.

"Uh, it's nothing, really. Anyway, since I'm involved in this now, I'd be grateful if you could bring me up to speed."

*It began on that day some six months ago when Tarim called for me, saying he had something very important to discuss. I agreed to meet with him, of course. He specified the Daymia residence—that is to say, he asked that we meet in the center of that room far above us. Moments after I arrived, something resembling slime overtook me. I was unable to defend myself. And when the slime solidified, I was sealed… in this.*

"So this emerald-colored stuff is the slime's hardened form?"

*Correct. It would seem that Tarim and Daymia conspired to oust me, each assuming he would take my place in the chairman's position. Of course, the two fell into discord. It's funny, really.*

It was not funny! Talk about *detached,* jeez.

What was really getting to me, though, was that bastard, Tarim! I knew he was hiding something when I asked him about Halcyform and his demeanor changed. I just couldn't have imagined something like *this* would be the reason why!

*Unforgivable! For what he did to Halcyform, and for lying to me, Lina Inverse, I'd give him a thousand deaths!*

*Again, I must ask you to please tone down your thoughts somewhat. It's distressing.*

*Oops. I did it again.*"Uh… heh, sorry about that. Very rude of me… er, anyway—! Do not fear. I vow to avenge you!"

*Well, while that is very kind of you, since I am not deceased, I*

*was hoping instead that you could release me from this prison. I would be most grateful.*

"Oh. Uh, release, huh? Hmmm, guess that would mean breaking the shell, right?"

*Guess so…* Halcyform replied a little flakily.

*My apologies for the flakiness.*

Telepathy can be a real pain in the butt.

"Gourry!" I shouted as soon as my head popped out of the water. "Gimme your sword! Now!"

"Wha—? Who, huh, what? What do you mean, popping out all of a sudden and ordering me around!"

As I surfaced and started shouting, he awoke from his nap on top of the pillar, startled.

*Why, that little… A person's doing dangerous stuff underwater, and he takes a… nap!*

"There really *is* someone locked inside that thing! I need to get him out, but to do that, I'll have to use your sword to break the shell around him."

"Oh, right! Gotcha." Gourry grasped the sword on his hip with his left hand and pulled a needle out of a side pocket with his right. He pricked a spot on the sword's hilt with the needle, and a small metal fastener made a tinny sound as it hit the floor. That fastener held the sword's blade and hilt together. Leaving the blade in its sheath, he handed the hilt to me.

It wasn't a joke or anything.

I took the hilt, gripping it before me with both hands.

"Light, come forth!" I called, and a blade sprang forth—a flickering, shining blade of light. *This* was the legendary Sword of Light that obliterated the Demon Beast of Sairaag City.

Actually, that sword was more than half the reason that I was traveling with Gourry. The blade was the physical manifestation of a person's mental power. I thought it would make a marvelous subject for research someday.

Within the warding field of the powerful Rune Breaker, I expected the magic contained within the sword would be weakened, but the blade's length and brightness were completely unchanged. I really thought I'd be dealing with a sword about half its normal length.

*Hmmm, perhaps this sword is comprised of a different* kind *of magic?*

Whatever the case, I wouldn't know for sure until I'd spent plenty of time researching it.

"Hey Gourry, feel like giving me this sword to keep yet?" I asked. He replied with a tedious wave.

"No, I don't—and I'm not gonna. Get going already."

"Meanie," I muttered as I took a deep breath and cast the same spell I had already cast more times than I cared to count.

"Ray Wing!" I went back underwater, having lost track of how

often I'd done that today, too. I wanted that trip down to be the last, if at all possible.

"Val Flare!" I shouted. "Dam Brass!"

Ka-boooom! Twin flares of light shot from Chairman Halcyform and I, smashing through the ceiling far above us. Light from the room above shone through the dust and countless fragments in freefall. The three of us shielded our eyes and gazed skyward through our fingers.

While freeing the chairman, I'd also managed to destroy the pillars maintaining the ward.

It wouldn't have done much for my rep if Gourry had sliced the guy up by mistake, so, after taking a little moment to explain the situation to him, we used a levitation spell to return to the floor above—that is, to the ceiling through which we'd just smashed.

Insane laughter echoed above us.

"Mr. Halcyform, I should warn you, Daymia has a couple of fairly powerful Mazoku working with him, so please be careful."

"Thank you. Yes, of course, I will be," Mr. Halcyform replied cheerfully. *Cheerfully?* I wondered if he'd really be all right.

The three of us thrust beyond the demolition and came back down, landing on an undamaged section of the floor.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said to Daymia, making an effort to answer his maniacal hyuks with a grin and a laugh of my own. Gourry squatted down, not paying much attention.

“Wh-wha?!” Daymia cried out, falling on his rear. “Ch-Ch-Chairman Halcyform!”

“Well, hello there. It’s been half a year, has it not, Vice Chairman Daymia?” Halcyform cracked a smile, sounding almost… casual.

He was starting to really scare me. Daymia’s face paled as well.

“W-wait! N-no… it wasn’t me, it wasn’t me at all,” he stuttered.

That was pretty rich—saying “it wasn’t me” to a guy locked up in a ward constructed under your own floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Who was it, then?” the smiling Halcyform inquired.

I’m telling you, he was scary

“T-Tarim! H-h-he talked me into this! I never meant to do anything like this to you! I’ve never borne you any malice! Please… please, forgive me!”

*Now just a…*

“Really? I see. I will set off to speak with Tarim, then,” Halcyform said unexpectedly. I was taken by surprise.

“Ah…” Daymia’s face lit up with hope. “Y-yes, indeed! Ah, yes… indeed, this is why you are the great chairman of Atlas City! Yes, indeed it is!”

“Miss Lina, Mr. Gourry, let us be off.” With that, Halcyform turned around, paying no attention to Daymia, and departed, walking toward what I thought was the exit. The two of us followed in mild

shock.

"Is this all right? I mean, leaving him like that?" I asked as I caught up to him. I inadvertently glanced back toward the chamber and caught Daymia absorbed in another fit of maniacal laughter.

"Why wouldn't it be?" the chairman purred softly. "Though he has not been a person capable of a reasonable conversation for some time, he's correct in his assertion that Tarim is more responsible for my watery imprisonment than he is. In any case, I will inform Duke Rithahn and settle this with the Council in a day or two.

"Oh," he added, "should you meet him first, please do not inform Tarim of my return."

"Of course not, but I have to tell you, we don't intend to return to Tarim's place. Since he deceived us, we're unilaterally voiding the contract. We have no intention of assisting that man any further."

"Oh, I think that's wise," he said, with a seriousness that seemed put-on.

For some reason, something about the whole situation felt odd to me.

The three of us left together. With the sun already up, we could make out the forms of passersby in transit.

"Well, then, I must first return to my own residence," Halcyform announced by way of goodbye.

"I'm sure Rubia will be glad to see you." As I spoke, he flinched, then broke into a smile.

“You know Rubia, then?”

“Your assistant? No, we heard about her from Tarim is all,” I lied. I didn’t really know why I did. Gourry backed me up with his usual poker face. Of course, he might well have simply *forgotten* we’d met Miss Rubia, but let’s give him the benefit of the doubt, shall we?

“I see. You be careful as well, of course. Tarim may still have some tricks up his sleeves. I may even need to call upon your help once more,” he offered in a friendly tone.

“Sure. We’ll be staying at the Silver Dragon Inn downtown. You take care of yourself.”

“I will. Well, then…” He waved as he turned around, his white mantle flowing behind him. For no particular reason, I watched until he was out of sight.

* * *

We had gone back to the inn where we’d left our belongings, and I’d hit the hay just after eating breakfast, but it was early evening by the time I woke up.

When I did manage to open my eyes, lunch and dinner were both sitting next to me. So was Gourry. He didn’t need to say a word.

“I guess this is thanks from Chairman Halcyform?” I ventured.

“Yeah,” he replied.

I stuffed some salad into my mouth while Gourry grimaced and made a sound of discontent.

“What?”

“Sorry, I just… a little thing keeps bothering me. If Daymia was keeping those two Mazoku around, why didn’t he call them when we were breaking into the house?”

I nibbled on a bit of pork steak.

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but my best guess is because of the Rune Breaker. The ward decreases all magic power within it. Since demons draw power from magic, they probably wouldn’t have been able to help.”

“But what about after we destroyed the ward and escaped? He didn’t think of calling them over and making it three on three? Don’t you think that’s weird?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s what a sane person would do, but that guy didn’t think like any normal person.”

“That’s why I’m asking *you.”*

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

Gourry looked surprised that I was offended.

“What? It’s no big deal. It’s just that, well, you don’t think like a normal person, so I thought…”

*It is* too *a big deal, buddy!*

“I dunno. It just didn’t seem like they’d let us escape that easily is all. Maybe they have something else in mind? And, well, now that we’re on the subject, if Tarim and Daymia had it in for Halcyform so badly, why didn’t they just kill him?”

“Well… uh… they probably had some other use for him. I guess. Probably.”

“I see…” He nodded, but I could tell by his face that he wasn’t buying it. He made a not especially elegant sound as he drank some watered-down herbal sake.

I sipped some warm milk.

“The real problem’s Daymia’s next move,” I offered after a bit. “We can’t predict what someone like *that* is going to do next.”

“I agree.” Gourry nodded sullenly.

I could think of about a dozen different scenarios, and I had no idea which one he’d pick. And it would probably be something I hadn’t thought of anyway! It was entirely possible he’d try to eliminate Chairman Halcyform *and* us. Although I could be confident that he’d act in the interest of his own survival, I didn’t know enough to calculate what his other priorities were. It was possible that he’d attack Tarim to try to get Halcyform to spare his neck. Of course, that might actually put him on thinner ice by making him look guilty—but would he realize that? Another possibility was that he might simply stay at his house, shaking with fear. Or he might try to flee the city altogether. Halcyform held back when he had the chance to take him out. I wasn’t sure that was the right thing to do.

“I’ve been thinking about Tarim, too,” I said. “He might try and pull something when he figures out we’re not coming back. He might even get in touch with Daymia.”

“You think they might join forces again?”

“They might. If they do, we’ll just have to…”

“Keep our heads down and back up Halcyform, I figure.”

“Yep. We’re just helping him out a bit, though. Anyway, we’d better hurry up and finish our meal so we can get moving,” I said, wrapping up the topic. “Hey, pops, another blue-plate special over here—pronto!”

# The Puppetmaster

The streets were empty and the sky had grown dark. The only signs of life were the small shafts of light that occasionally filtered out through the windows of the houses lining the road. Gourry and I walked shoulder to shoulder in silence.

It was getting cold. I'd left my mantle at Tarim's place, and the spare that I'd managed to find wasn't cutting it. The leather shoulder guards I'd bought on my way back to the inn yester—er, *this morning*—helped a little, but not much. My armored scales were much better, and since they made me look a little taller, I had every intention of getting them back. For the time being, I at least had my sword to keep me warm. (Warrior's logic. Don't question it; just keep reading.)

We followed the path uphill and passed a single sorcerer, clad in a black mantle, casting lighting spells for street lamps.

"Where do you think *you're* going?" asked a familiar voice. Gourry and I stopped walking.

*Was that guy talking to us?*

We turned and looked back at our "sorcerer." Hood down, his silver hair was buffeted by the wind, and his eerily long arm extended toward the street lamp.

"Doing your community service, Mr. Gio Gaia?" I couldn' t help but laugh as I considered the possibility.

"In a manner of speaking, I suppose," he said, his emerald eye

brightening. “I am cleaning riff-raff off the streets.” Calmly and deliberately, he moved to the center of the road. His tattered robe billowed in the wind.

“Don’t go for it until I tell you to,” I whispered in a low voice. Gourry nodded.

I didn’t need to spell out that the thing I didn’t want him to go for prematurely was the Sword of Light. Pureblood Mazoku like Gio and Seigram are impervious to physical attacks. For the most part, spells are ineffective as well. The Sword of Light, however, possesses the capacity to render an opponent’s *soul* asunder. It’s a sword capable of destroying existence itself. For that reason, it’s pretty darned effective against demons. So much so that it would probably be overkill to use it against this little guy, but whatever…

“I don’t think you can handle this job,” I warned him. “If you had Mr. White Mask with you, you might have a chance, but…”

“Mr. White Mask? You mean Seigram the Formless?” he asked.

*Seigram the Formless? Does that mean there’s not actually anything* under *that mask?*

“I’m afraid Seigram the Formless is otherwise occupied. I would, however, be grateful for the opportunity to prove you wrong in your assessment.” Gio moved closer, his footsteps making no sound.

“Seriously, for your own sake—you should stop now,” I said as I raised my right hand, my palm facing outward indicating the international sign for “Whoa there, buddy—if you come any closer, I’ll have to drop you.”

Gio moved closer still, and silently watched as I cast my spell.

"Dug Wave!" I shouted, and there was a large explosion at his feet. Of course, a stunt like that wouldn't inflict any real damage on Gio. It would temporarily blind him, however.

Unsheathing the Sword of Light, Gourry leapt into the center of the dense dust cloud just as half-mask leapt out. In the confusion, Gio didn't notice Gourry's having made the switch.

"Elmekia Lance!" I unleashed my next spell. Anticipating that my magic lance was targeting his Astral weakness and shooting toward his landing point, Gio froze in midair, causing the lance to miss. Just barely.

"Pathetic," he hissed nastily, and he swung his right hand down hard. Sensing something awful coming, I jumped to the side.

*Whizzz!* A low sound, like the buzzing of insect wings, filled my ears. A few hairs were ripped out of my head, and the end of my cloak was torn apart. The brunt of the blow passed, but a strange feeling of discomfort lingered.

A miasma shock wave! It had to have been.

That was a dangerous trick. If one of his hands or feet had managed to touch me, the miasma would have spread through my body and short-circuited my bioelectrical system, resulting in death. Not even a giant could withstand a blow like that.

Okay, so maybe he wasn't a *top-class* opponent, but he was proving to be one I couldn't hold back on. We could be in real danger if I let this battle drag on.

“Dam Brass!” I fired off my next spell. Waves of small red orbs of light exploded on impact, ripping up the ground where they hit. It was a most excellent smokescreen!

The bad news was that I couldn’t see Gio. The good news was that he couldn’t see me, either. Mazoku can sense malice and enmity in humans, and they use those sentiments like homing devices, so Gourry and I were fighting hard to suppress our emotions.

Just as I considered the possibility that he might start launching miasma shock waves randomly…

“There!” Gio spotted me. As he yelled, I threw a spell at my feet and dove out of the way. A shock wave tore through the dust cloud. If I hadn’t gotten myself airborne, I’d have been ripped to shreds.

“Waah!” I shrieked, making it sound like his attack had hit me square in the middle. I knew I had to lay it on thick to fool a Mazoku. It was an impressive performance, if I do say so myself.

Sometimes, I just have to take a moment to admire my own talents.

… Okay, moment’s over. Anyway…

“Ha ha! You fool!” Completely duped, Gio Gaia figured he could exit the cloud with impunity, and he did. So confident in his infallibility, he continued to move forward, paying no heed to Gourry whatsoever.

Obviously, that demon either didn’t know or had forgotten about the Sword of Light.

*Exactly what I was hoping for.*

The shriek from my solo performance wasn't solely intended to throw Gio off. It was also Gourry's signal.

"Now, where did she go?" Half-mask surveyed the area; Gourry drew his blade.

"Arrrgh!" Gio roared. With a single blow, Gourry had lopped off the demon's long right arm. Thanks only to a reflexive lurch of his body did Gio save his own life. "Damn you!" he cried, and thrust his remaining hand outward.

The shockwave lunged toward Gourry. Even *he* couldn't dodge it at that range!

"Nnguh!!" Gourry grunted and maneuvered. The Sword of Light absorbed the miasma wave, reducing it to a harmless breeze. Both Gio and I stared, agog.

"Impossible! The Sword of Light?! No one told me he had the Sword of *Light!"* Gio raged.

Well, of course not. The only people in Atlas City who knew about it were Gourry, Chairman Halcyform, and myself. It wasn't like we were gonna advertise it.

There was something else that Gio didn't know about us. Namely, that I didn't have a particularly chivalric nature. I wasn't going to just let him stand there dumbfounded until he recovered from the shock.

"Elmekia Lance!" I hollered, and *this* time, I didn't miss.

"Guaaaah!" he bellowed once more.

When used against humans, the most this spell can do is cause mental collapse. Since demons are almost purely Astral beings, however, a direct hit should be fatal.

Only… it wasn't.

"Gourry!" I shouted.

"Right!" he responded, running and leaping toward the demon in the half-mask. The Sword of Light flashed in the darkness, missing its target by a hairsbreadth.

"Next time, I *will* kill you!" Gio threatened as he fled, disappearing into the darkness faster than we could hope to follow. Gourry sheathed the Sword of Light and returned to my side.

"Wow. Even his clichéd exit line was pathetic…" I marveled.

As the dust from the tumult settled, we noted that although the residents of the houses lining our battlefield surely must have been watching the goings on, no one had chosen to come outside and risk getting involved. We were still alone on the street. Oh, well. Couldn't blame them, really. I'd have done the same.

Er… scratch that. We *had* been alone, but as soon as I thought

it, I noticed a solitary figure standing further up the hill. From the ambient streetlight, I could make out his red hair.

"Lantz?" Gourry called out.

Lantz's face was pale.

"Wh-where have you two been?" he asked, his voice quivering.

"What's wrong? Did something happen? Are you okay? You look pretty bad." I couldn't get over how the blood had left his cheeks. As I approached, he took a step backward.

"Did you… did you go to Daymia's?" he asked.

"Did we what?" I wasn't clear what he was getting at. Gourry and I exchanged glances. I was reminded of how I'd sensed something odd about Chairman Halcyform when I stood beside him. "What happened?"

"You were there, you tell me!" Lantz yelled back at me. He wasn't raising his voice in anger, but rather in an attempt to conceal his fear.

"Yeah, we were there. But—"

"Then it *was* you!" he shouted. "Then you're the ones who did it!"

"Huh?" I thought he meant that we had been the ones to rescue Halcyform—and we had been. But I couldn't figure out why that would drain all the life from his complexion.

"What do you mean by it? What happened at Daymia's place?! We were there, yeah, but everything was fine when we left." I was

leaving some pretty important details out, sure, but my first priority was to get him to calm down. Laying all the facts out at once would just upset him further.

"You didn't do it?" He sounded dumbfounded, but calm.

"That's right. We didn't do anything. I swear. Look me in the eye if you don't believe me." I stared straight at him, fixing my gaze on his pupils. My natural instinct was to look away just to mess with him, but this was absolutely *not* the time for hijinks. I resisted.

"Now, please tell me. What the heck happened at Daymia's place?" I asked, once he was satisfied that I wasn't pulling his leg.

"I don't know how to explain it," Lantz said with a sigh. "I don't even *understand* it. Maybe… maybe you should come with me."

Gourry and I looked at each other and nodded.

"Okay. Let's go."

* * *

The Daymia residence stood silent and foreboding, blocking the moon's radiance with its silhouette. At first glance, nothing had changed since last night. But… there was something in the air, a kind of unease that foreshadowed a new horror awaiting us. Tension ran through my body like a blade.

*What the hell happened here?*

"This is spooky," Gourry muttered to himself uncharacteristically. A small bead of sweat formed on his forehead.

"It's creepy, all right. Well, then, shall we go in?" I suggested. I

heard Lantz yelp beside me.

The three of us advanced through the open gate. The air, damp and chilly, wrapped around my body like a wet blanket. Inside the gates, I sensed enmity, sadness… desperation. In other words, a miasma. It took me a minute to recognize that sick cocktail of emotions, but it was definitely the residual effects of a miasma.

The front door wasn't locked.

"Ugh," I grunted as I used my hip to force it in.

As soon as the door swung open, we were smacked in the face with the perfume of fresh slaughter.

"What is that *smell?* It's something like blood, I know, but…," Gourry muttered to no one in particular, a grimace on his face.

"Over here." Lantz led us deeper into the mansion. As we moved in, the stench grew stronger.

"You guys completely vanished last night," he mused aloud, apropos of nothing. He may have been trying to distract himself from his fear. "After we beat down the rest of those creatures, I looked up and poof! Both of you were gone. I thought maybe you were dead, but we couldn't find your corpses.

"It wasn't a good idea to start poking around at night, so I waited 'til dawn," he explained, "then Rod and I split up and went looking for you. I didn't have any luck, so I went back to Tarim's place around noon. We were supposed to rendezvous there, but Rod never showed."

"He didn't?" I was genuinely surprised. Of course *we* had our

reasons for not going back, but Rod?

"I don't know what the hell's going on. I waited awhile then decided to go look for the three of you. I figured that maybe… maybe you'd come *here* for some reason and gotten into some kind of trouble—captured or killed or something like that. I thought maybe Rod tried to help and got caught, too? I don't know what I was thinking exactly. I came here and didn't see anyone, but… I got this sick feeling. Like something was horribly, horribly wrong. I was just… sick. And I-I was scared… His voice trailed off, and he looked at the floor—a little ashamed, I think.

We headed down the same corridor we'd traversed the night before. All the doors along the way were still open. I peeked into one of the rooms, not expecting to see much of anything.

"Gaaaah! What the—?!" The floor was covered in a nasty viscous fluid and about a gazillion broken crystal vials. In the center of the room, a dozen or so squirming globs of flesh gathered. One was about the size of a cat, with neither eyes nor hair. It was lying on its side, moaning and scratching at the air with stubby, jointless limbs. We could see its internal organs through its tissue-thin skin, and the blood vessels in its transparent wings (yes, it had wings) throbbed audibly. A puppy with snake scales wiggled next to it, and a bird with tentacles grew out of its stomach.

Any child witnessing this would become psychologically scarred for life.

"Oh my God! What *is* that?" someone barked in my ear—half shouting, half retching. My head snapped back to find the source. It

was Gourry.

"Daymia's chimeras," I answered.

I averted my eyes and noticed a bunch of strange-looking tools stacked together on a table in a corner of the room. I had seen instruments like them long ago, in a back room at the Sorcerers' Guild in my homeland. There, they were used to manufacture trinkets and talismans, but here… here, they were being used on *living beings*.

"Let's keep going," Lantz urged us on, "This isn't where we're headed."

We couldn't object, of course. We didn't want to look at the carnage any more than he did. My fear was that I was going to remember it in detail the next time I sat down to a meal.

There were similar scenes behind every open door. No matter how hard I looked, I just couldn't make sense of what I was seeing. In one room, there were piles of weapons and armor covered in that nasty slime. In another, mummies— the corpses of male mercenaries, I think—convulsed about. And then…

"Huh? What was that?" I stopped walking.

"What was what?" asked Gourry.

"That voice…" I could hear it only faintly.

"Is it laughing?" Lantz asked. He sounded shaken.

"Yes! You hear it, too?" I heard laughter somewhere in the distance, but I couldn't tell where it was coming from.

He shook his head. “No. When I saw… when I saw*it*...” He paused to allow a small shudder to pass through his body. “I heard a laugh.”

“What *it?”*

Lantz didn’t answer my question.

Finally, we came to the same huge door as the previous night—the door to the room that had housed the Rune Breaker. The same room we’d been in that very morning.

The laughing grew louder. The source was behind this door. It was Daymia, certainly, no mystery there. He had a strange laugh when we met him before, but not like *this*.

“Here?” I asked. Lantz nodded.

“I’m going in,” Gourry announced, not waiting for either of us to answer. As he opened the door, the laughter got louder and more maniacal. Gourry took one step inside, turned and surveyed the room, and then stopped abruptly From where I stood, I couldn’t see what he was looking at.

“What the hell is… *that?”* His lips curled back into a snarl.

I glanced over at Lantz. He was shaking.

“I’ve seen it already,” he said. “I don’t want to see anything like that again, ever….”

I made my way to Gourry’s side, stood beside him, and looked in the same direction. *It* was slowly turning around.

I froze. I couldn’t speak.

I was staring at an enormous lump of flesh. It was writhing—the arrangement of its internal organs and the pulsing of its veins fully visible.

As we watched, a snake sprang forth from the top of the lump. The snake, borne of the hideous meatball, grew into an arch half the size of the clump. It swallowed the mound of flesh, essentially consuming itself, and then sunk back into its fleshy mass.

Daymia's laughter grew especially riotous when the snake consumed the flesh.

"Raugnut Rushavna…," I muttered under my breath. Beads of sweat slid down my cheek.

Once, on a stopover during my travels, I'd heard a story about a king. Some twenty years before, the celebrated sovereign of the Kingdom of Gairia, Dirus the Second (also known as Dirus Ror Gairia), had set off with five thousand troops to suppress the Demon King of the North, who was said to be the source of all the disorder in this world. Neither he nor a single one of his soldiers ever returned. Legend says that the Demon King destroyed them. That was what most people believed, anyhow.

But in truth, King Dirus *had* returned. Alone. As night became dawn, the soldiers at the palace recognized the thing that had appeared in their midst. A sticky, fleshy mass made its way to the royal throne. As the snake, borne of its flesh, consumed it, it spoke sternly to the soldiers.

"Kill me," it commanded in the voice of King Dirus. A dark ritual, beyond human understanding, had reduced their sovereign to

this horrible form.

Mercifully, one of his soldiers raised his sword. But the cuts and blows only brought more suffering to his king. Unable to save him, his vassals sealed him—or the thing that he had become—somewhere. They never told anyone where. It's said that even today, the voice of King Dirus is carried into Castle Gairia by the night wind.

"Kill me," it begs.

Those who fall prey to this ritual die over and over until the demon responsible for their torture is destroyed. Daymia was suffering King Dirus' fate. It was a ritual too powerful for human flesh, which meant that the one who had perverted Daymia's mind and body had to be Seigram the Formless— the demon in the white mask.

* * *

We quickly worked our way out of what was now Daymia's tomb as fast as we could, taking in the night air in gulps. It felt good, cleansing.

"You know what that thing is, don't you?" Lantz asked after a brief pause. "You recognize it, don't you?"

"Sort of…" I nodded weakly.

Gourry's and Lantz's complexions both looked bluish, and it wasn't the fault of the moonlight.

"That *thing*… is *Daymia the Blue,"* I explained. "It's a spell, one that only a Mazoku can use."

"That's a *person*?" Lantz's horror was palpable. "Y-you mean to tell me that our enemies are Mazoku who would turn a human being into… *that?!* Wh-whoa, now, w-wait just a damn minute! Y-you don't mean you plan to fight that thing?!" What little color remained in his face drained away as he grappled to understand what kind of enemy we were up against.

I nodded. "Yep. We only agreed to get involved in this mess because we knew these two Mazoku were behind it."

"TWO?!" Lantz went apoplectic. "Who are you kidding?! We don't have enough lives between us to take down *one* guy like that! Let alone *two?!* You can't be serious."

"We can," I said.

"…And we are," Gourry finished my thought in a light voice, tilting his head as he did so.

Lantz stared hard. "Who… who the hell are you people? No way ordinary mercenaries would sign on for something like this."

Well, at least he was perceptive. Gourry and I are anything but ordinary.

"No, don't tell me!" Lantz erupted before I could even open my mouth. "Forget it! I don't care who you are. This is where I get off!" he said, heading for the door. 'And if that makes me a coward, then so be it. If you're smart, you'll let this go and get the hell out of town while you still can. No one should die like *that!* Nobody!"

He broke into *a jog,* and then a run, stopping only once to turn and shout a warning to us, "Stop now! Let it go!" Then he vanished

into the darkness. Gourry and I watched in silence. We didn't blame him, and we didn't think he was a coward. On the contrary, he did exactly as we'd hoped he would. If he'd wanted to stay and fight with us, we probably would have tried to talk him out of it. He'd be more of a liability in a fight than anything else—it wasn't that he was weak, just that Gourry and I were used to working as a team, and well, the enemy was a Mazoku.

Lantz couldn't use magic—and he didn't have a Sword of Light to make up for it. So, no matter how skilled he was, he couldn't help.

"Hey Lina," Gourry mumbled, still gazing into the darkness after Lantz. "How do you think those demons are connected to all this?"

"How?" I had to think about it for a minute. "Aaah!" I got it. I'd been so sure that the demons were working for Daymia all this time that I forgot about *Tarim the Violet!*

I looked back to where Lantz had disappeared—he was headed for the Tarim residence. "We've gotta follow him!"

"We do?" Gourry was surprised.

"He's in trouble!" I said, and took off running.

"Hey! What do you mean? In trouble how?!" Gourry asked, running after me.

"Tarim the Violet's probably behind this whole thing!"

"Whaaat?!" Gourry stopped for a moment, then resumed the chase. "How the hell does that work?!"

“Tarim used Daymia to seal up Halcyform, figuring he could take care of Daymia later. But Daymia was smarter than he thought. As long as that Rune Breaker was in place, Tarim couldn’t be sure that sending those Mazoku after Daymia would get the job done. So, he figured he’d have to hire human mercenaries to do it,” I explained on the hoof. Laying out the whole thing was a tedious process, but it was the only way to make sure we didn’t cross swords with the enemy while Gourry had no real idea what was going on. Working in the dark might dull his edge, so to speak. He was running a short ways behind me, listening carefully… I hoped.

“So, Tarim sent Rod to hire his killers, and Rod found us,” I explained. “He could tell we didn’t have any intention of actually signing on, so he sent those two demons to challenge us. Anyone who’d back down from a couple of demons wasn’t cut out to do the job anyway.”

“So we got suckered pretty good.” Gourry had a way of cutting to the heart of the matter.

“Exactly!” I gritted my teeth. “He probably sent his monsters after us just to test our strength. Then he used the demon in the white mask—Seigram, the one Gio called the Formless—to lure us to Daymia’s place. His plan must’ve been to trick us into thinking Daymia was responsible for everything so that we’d destroy him.”

“And then we walked right into the pit,” Gourry added. “Yeah, he hadn’t counted on us meeting the chairman and releasing him. Somehow Tarim must’ve gotten wind of it, though, so now he’s afraid of involving the law, and he’s trying to eliminate all the witnesses in one shot: Daymia (who’s defenseless without the Rune

Breaker) and us."

"Halcyform's in danger too, isn't he?" Gourry asked. "No, there has to be a reason why he was sealed up and not killed. Whatever that reason was, unless circumstances have changed, I doubt his life's in danger. Lantz, however…," I trailed off. We still hadn't spotted him. Since he knew the layout of the city much better than we did, he might have taken a shortcut.

"Lantz has no idea that Tarim's behind this. If he gets back and says the wrong thing, Tarim might decide he's no longer useful or he knows too much. He could be executed on the spot—or worse!" I didn't really want to think about it.

"You know…Gourry started, "you sure change your theories a lot."

Argh!! I was so taken aback that I lost my focus and tripped, which sent me flying forward. Crunch! "Ow, ow, ow!"

*Don't step on people when they're down, Gourry!* I lifted my head, and he glanced back at me as he passed.

"Sorry. Guess that was a little harsh," he offered.

"Ya think?!" I got up and started running again. "When circumstances change, then of course the conclusions you draw change, too! That's not theorizing, it's deduction!"

"Okay, whatever. Your point is that all roads lead to Tarim, right?" Gourry asked, leaning toward me for some kind of clarification.

"Yes! And we have to hurry!" As we continued down the dark

path, I got an ominous feeling in my chest. Our night was only just beginning.

* * *

I froze where I stood. Gourry did as well.

The Tarim residence had already become a slaughterhouse. Just inside the front door, we choked on the stench of death. The blood of fallen mercenaries had collected into what could justifiably be called a *sea* covering the entirety of the first floor. I felt the urge to vomit. I'd been on many, many battlefields in my short life, but you never get used to smells like that.

If you ever meet anyone who says they aren't bothered by it, be very, very afraid.

Looking at what was left of the mercenaries Tarim had hired was enough to turn the most iron of stomachs into rust pits. It looked like they'd been on the wrong end of a legion of combat drones! That's not a fight I would've expected the mercenaries to win, per se, but I wouldn't have predicted such a… massacre.

"Where's Lantz?" Gourry's words shook me back to the present.

"Inside!" I said as I pressed on. My boots made a squishing sound in the gut soup, like stepping into mud.

We curved through a corridor that opened up into a foyer. I stopped.

Lantz—well, he was lying on the floor in a stew of corpse parts and broken furniture. He was still whole and breathing, which put him in a far better position than the rest of his comrades.

And there, standing over him, sword drawn and bloodied: Rod.

He turned his dark eyes toward us.

“I was hoping you’d come. Now we’ll find out who’s better,” he said to Gourry.

“I don’t get it,” I mumbled.

“I was constrained from challenging you while we were allies,” he explained, turning his fouled sword in our direction, drops of blood falling to the floor like exclamation points. In the weak light, the blade reflected a faint purple.

“So that’s it, huh?” Gourry answered. He was horrified, but not surprised. There was a quiet anger behind his words. I didn’t quite understand what was going on yet.

“Yes. I transferred my allegiance to Halcyform to make this very encounter possible.”

*He what?!* I thought my eyes were going to pop out of my head. *Then, he did this became? Wait, that would mean… Oh, nuh-UHU*

“I’m sorry I’ll have to deny you what means so much,” Gourry said, stepping in front of me. He had not yet drawn his sword.

“Deny me? What must I do to inspire your challenge? Kill the girl?” Rod asked.

“Even if it were that easy, it wouldn’t be necessary. I don’t intend to deny you your fight, only your victory,” Gourry answered.

I took a step back. The tension in the room was nearly unbearable.

“Lina, go see what you can do for Lantz. I’ll take care of this.”

“I’m going,” I said, and nodded. He was asking me not to get involved in their fight no matter what, and I’d just agreed. I wasn’t entirely sure he could take Rod—and of course I was worried—but the look in Gourry’s eyes said he wanted to fight this one on his own. I focused my energies on Lantz.

The poor guy was hurting, but I was pretty sure I could pull him through. I placed my hand on his belly wound and chanted a healing spell.

“Shall we do it here?” Gourry asked Rod.

“Wherever,” Rod curtly replied.

Gourry reached for his sword and in an instant, the stench of blood, the carnage—everything but the contest was forgotten, pushed aside by the tension of their conflicting wills.

Gourry drew and Rod charged. The twin flashes of light met in a clatter. Gourry deflected a blow and managed to slip his sword in toward his opponent’s flank. Rod stepped sideways, smoothly reversing his blade. He had the longer reach. Pulling his metal back, he stopped Gourry’s strike cold, abruptly changing directions. Gourry plunged his own blade down to protect himself from the scooping attack. His sword dipped under Rod’s, lifting it up.

He wasn’t fast enough. Rod easily pulled his body back, evading the counterattack. The two separated.

They were so quick on their feet that my eyes could barely keep track of their movements.

The two rushed each other once more. Gourry parried a high blow from Rod. Rod pulled back and thrust toward the opening left by the parrying blade. Gourry's weapon spun, deflecting Rod's sword once more. Again and again, Rod attacked and Gourry evaded. Rod was losing his patience.

Though Gourry was engaged in a defensive battle, he only seemed to be getting stronger, more determined. I hoped he had some kind of plan.

Too clever to underestimate his opponent, Rod dared not let up for a moment.

And then …

"Hah!!" Gourry yelled, distracting himself enough to create an opening for Rod that was too good to let pass. His blade surged up under Gourry's. Neither was in a position to evade.

*A mutual strike!*

CLANG! A metallic sound echoed off the chamber walls.

Gourry had altered his strike mid-swing, bringing it down to his left and onto Rod's blade. The resulting impact severed Rod's weapon, sending more than half of it tumbling to the floor. Gourry, cleverly, had aimed for the sword. If he had aimed at Rod himself, he would have been resigning himself to a mutual strike, as he had foreseen.

The instant Rod realized his blade had been cut, he lunged forward, altering his attack. The tip of his steel caught Gourry, and a bloodstain began to spread from the cuff of Gourry's fighting arm.

“Looks like I got the worst of that one,” Gourry said, daring to laugh.

“You are a worthy opponent indeed….” Rod smiled. It was the first time I’d seen him smile, and it was eerily amicable.

“Let’s finish it.” Gourry gripped his weapon with both hands, raising it to eye level.

Rod rested his blade on his right shoulder in silence.

Gourry charged. Rod extended his body.

The two met sword to sword, will to will, and held there, unflinching. Then, without weakening at all, they flew apart, creating a gulf between them.

Gourry lost his balance. Perhaps the injury to his strong arm had thrown him off, or maybe his foot had slipped on some blood. Whatever the reason, for a moment, he wavered. .

Rod lunged. Gourry’s stance wouldn’t allow him to dodge or deflect the blow. He collapsed forward, falling to the floor on one knee. Rod raised his blade, angling it to plunge downward. He meant to bury it in Gourry’s left shoulder…

He meant to, and he would have, if his sword had been its original length. Handling it like the blade he was accustomed to, he made no more than a shallow dent in Gourry’s shoulder guard.

In answer, Gourry rammed his blade through Rod’s flank.

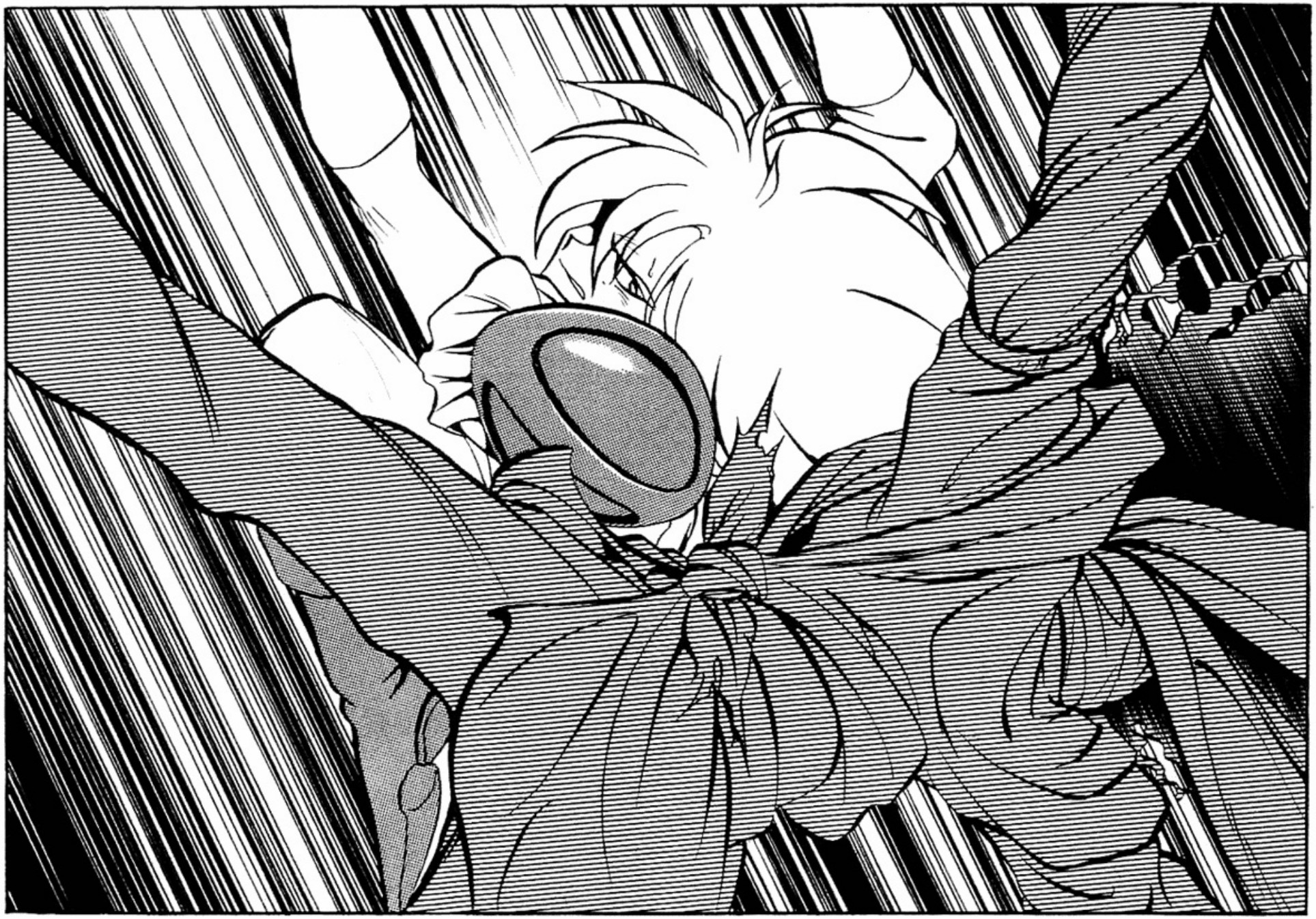
“You are… very good.” Rod smiled. He looked sincerely pleased as he complimented the man who had slain him. A bit of longing

still gleamed in his eyes. Blood gushed from his wound. His sword slid and then fell from his grip. “I would like to do this again someday,” he said, his face childlike, devoid of malice.

“I don’t think that’s gonna happen,” Gourry replied honestly. His own forehead was slick with sweat.

“I see, yes. That is unfortunate.” Rod exhaled, his vitality fading. He fell to his knees, but in a gruesome display of irony, he did not collapse.

The Black Swordsman had impaled himself like a stick puppet on the broken shaft of his own sword.



# Apocalypse Wow: The Final Battle

*So, I guess it's been a pretty mysterious night.* Ordinarily I would've come up with a much wittier assessment than *that,* but I gotta be honest with you: at this point I was completely confused. Even taking into account all the places I've been in my life, and all the things I've seen, I was having a really hard time figuring out what was behind the evening's events.

Rod and Gourry's duel to the death alone was enough to give a girl pause! Add to that the fact that I'd somehow managed to carry Lantz to the nearest magical healer for treatment, only to return and find Gourry's arm in need of attention. When all was said and done, we returned to Tarim's mansion once more.

As we wandered from room to room looking for clues, I went over what we knew—or thought we knew. My theory that Tarim had been the mastermind behind this whole thing was looking pretty weak. I kept replaying Rod's words in my head over and over: *I transferred my allegiance to Halcyform to make this very encounter possible.* It just didn't make any sense.

And now the latest puzzle piece lay before us….

"So Lina, what do you figure this means?" Gourry asked, indicating with a wave.

I shook my head. We were looking at the corpse of a plump man shrouded in a purple robe, slumped over broken furniture that filled the room. It was probably Tarim the Violet. I used the word *probably* because corpses are hard to identify when they *have no heads!*

“What’s this mean? What the heck’s goin’ on?” Gourry repeated.

“I don’t know.” He could ask the question as many times as he wanted—my answer wasn’t going to change. I had no idea what was going on, really. All I could do was speculate.

And speculate I did. As we left Tarim’s and headed to Halcyform’s place, I considered all the possibilities. Halcyform might’ve been the one who’d sent the assassins to Tarim’s after we’d come onto the scene. Then again, the headless corpse might be a double, and Tarim might still be alive. Rod might have thrown out Halcyform’s name as a red herring… and so on, and so on. There was no proof to back up any of it.

“What’s our plan once we get to Halcyform’s place?” Gourry asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“You don’t know?!” Gourry was incredulous.

“I don’t know, okay? I don’t know or understand most of this. Maybe I don’t understand any of it, but Halcyform’s is the only place left to go for answers,” I explained.

“That’s not much of a plan,” Gourry said as he sighed.

“Maybe not, but we’re going to get to the bottom of this,” I declared. Then, after a beat I followed with: “I think it would be better if we snuck in somehow. How’s that for a plan?”

“Since when are *we* people who sneak in?” Gourry asked, looking surprised.

I slapped my forehead. I should have slapped his.

"Look, if what Rod said was true, and Halcyform *did* send those assassins, do you think we should just mosey in through the front door and be all, 'So, Mr. Halcyform, were you the one behind these mutilations and murders all along? C'mon, you can tell us.' Does that *really* sound like a good idea to you?"

"Probably not, huh?"

*Probably?!* I cut the conversation off. Talking to Gourry was exhausting. And besides that… we'd arrived.

There were no guards in the courtyard so we snuck around back, looking for an easy way in. The garden was scrupulously maintained. Nocturnal birds sang out in low voices.

"How about here?" I asked, indicating a small window leading into the basement. It wasn't very big, but it was certainly big enough for me to squeeze through. Gourry, however, wouldn't be able to manage it.

"I'm gonna head on in," I said. "I'll be right back, so wait here like a good boy, okay?" I felt like being cute, so I added a wink.

"W-wait a sec!" Gourry interjected, flustered. "You're going in *alone?"*

"What's the matter? You scared of spending five minutes by yourself in a garden?"

"It's not *that!* I just don't think you should go in on your own…." Gourry's voice trailed off, like he was embarrassed.

“It’s okay. I promise I’m not gonna cast the Dragon Slave or anything.” I put my hands together and rubbed them gently, trying my best to look menacing.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just…,” Gourry mumbled.

*Hey, does this mean…*

“Are you *worried* about me?” I laughed.

He turned his head away and scratched his nose. “Is being worried bad?”

“Have you fallen in love?” I asked with a straight face. He lost his cool. *Hee hee.*

“In love?! I’m your *guardian*—of course I’m worried!” Ever heard someone try to yell and whisper at the same time? It sounded like that.

“It doesn’t matter what you *say,* Gourry. Love is all over your face—”

“Hey! Just knock it off, okay!” He cut me off. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go ahead alone.”

“Well, I can fit through this window, and you can’t,” I said. It’s hard to argue with the obvious.

“Not true,” Gourry shot back and he drew his sword. A silver light flashed in the darkness.

*Cling!*

He re-sheathed his sword before I could even tell what had

happened.

"What'd you do?" I asked. He smiled, grabbed the window frame with both hands, and tugged on it lightly.

With a small sound, both the frame and the window pulled free. He'd cut the whole thing out.

"Huh."

What was I supposed to say? Not only had he cut the window frame out of the wall, but he'd done so without the glass breaking or falling into the basement. And, he'd done it almost silently. That level of skill is on a par with executioners who claim they can behead their charges in a single blow. Of course, most of them are *lying,* so…

Now that I think about it, maybe that's a bad example.

"Think we should take our armor off here?" he said, managing a minor chuckle. I acted unimpressed as we crawled through the window.

It was dark inside, save for a few beams of moonlight here and there. We stopped and let our eyes adjust. I couldn't cast a lighting spell; that would make it too easy to find us. Though most people would be deep into their dreams by this time, Halcyform was proving himself to be anything but "most people." And if he had sent Rod to Tarim's place, the fact that Rod hadn't returned meant that Halcyform wouldn't be sleeping peacefully.

We continued walking in silence because—um—there's not much to talk about when you can't see. Once our eyes began to

adjust, we started with things like, “That’s a table over there isn’t it?” and “I think those are drawers….” Deeply stimulating, huh?

“This sucks,” I offered. “I can’t see a darned thing. Hey, Gourry, how ‘bout you? You’ve got good eyes. See anything strange?”

“You can’t see?” he asked with concern in his voice. “There’s all sorts of magic paraphernalia lying around, but I don’t know that that really counts as strange.”

Hmmm. I squinted and looked around. There were numerous pieces of small furniture lined up in a row, creating shadows against the wall.

*Huh?*

Even in those low-light conditions, the shadows looked… odd, somehow. I approached them, being careful with my footsteps. Anywhere else, I wouldn’t have thought much of it, but here—any little thing was worth investigating. As I got closer I saw that a huge tapestry covered the wall—it was probably the gentle rippling of the fabric that had warped the shadows. A table was set up in front of the tapestry, but nothing was on the table, or even around it. In fact, the more I looked, the more the clutter seemed organized. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to direct attention *away* from that wall.

As silently as I could, I moved the table and pulled the tapestry down. Probing gently with my fingertips, I crept my hands along the stones. I was feeling for anything resembling a door.

*Jackpot!* Am I good or what?

(Don’t answer that.)

Okay, I know what you're thinking: of course there's a secret door. Duh. This is a sorcerer's residence after all, and sorcerers' homes usually have at least one secret chamber, and every secret chamber has at least one secret door. Well, did you ever ask yourself *why,* hotshot? Why all the secrecy, considering most sorcerers are good old-fashioned law-abiding folk, huh?

Well, I'm glad you asked, the answer is simple: research. Sorcerers are constantly involved in research. Tarim researched linguistics (because he liked to hear himself talk, if you ask me), while Halcyform was researching, um, something *life-related*. Anyway, no matter what kind of research a sorcerer is involved in, there is always someone eager to steal it and take the credit for him or herself. That's right! I know it's a shocking revelation, but there are sorcerers who steal from other sorcerers. (Not to mention the more generic baddies who'll steal research either to sell to another unsuspecting sorcerer or to use for their own nefarious intentions.)

So anyway, sorcerers go to great lengths to build secret rooms that don't appear on any floor plan and can be used as laboratories to protect their research against theft. The room behind the door I'd just found might well have been one such lab. In any case, there was no way to know for sure without taking a peek inside.

"Gourry! Over here!" I called in a loud whisper.

He walked over like he was crossing Main Street in broad daylight. He could see that well, even in the middle of the night.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a secret door here. There's probably a latch for it somewhere, but I'm not gonna be able to find

it in the dark. I don't want to do too much damage, but—"

"Now wait just a cotton-pickin' minute!" Gourry interrupted.

"Shh! Keep your voice down!" I reminded him.

"Sorry! But, how far are we gonna go here, Lina? We don't know for sure that Halcyform sent Rod after Tarim."

"Maybe not, but we came here to find out, and this room's definitely suspicious. If we're wrong, we'll apologize to him later. I'm sure he'll get over it."

"I hope so… ," Gourry sighed.

"Regardless! We've come this far. We have to go on if we're going to get to the bottom of this thing!"

"Yeah, okay, I guess you're right. It's just breaking and entering." He let out a small sigh and drew his sword. "Okay, I'll take a look."

"Ah, wait a sec." I stopped him long enough to cast a spell around him. I chose a wind barrier, something similar to Ray Wing, but a bit stronger. This barrier prevents internal sounds from escaping. You could flip over a china cabinet, and no one outside would hear so much as a clank.

"Okay, go ahead," I said when I was done.

Gourry's sword flashed out. In an instant, the wall slab he'd cut out fell inward.

*KA-THUD!* The noise was tremendous, but I had faith in my wind barrier. Furthermore, this was the basement. Unless there was

someone right on the other side, nobody should be the wiser.

*"Aw* yeah…" Gourry and I made simultaneous sounds of admiration before crossing through our improvised threshold.

The strangest thing about the corridor we were winding through was not its length (though it was remarkably long) nor its many twists and turns (though there were an impressive number of those, too). No, the strangest thing about the corridor was that the stone it was made of seemed to *glow.* For a moment, I considered the idea that it might be alive, or at least covered with some sort of, um, glow-y plant life, but I looked harder, and except for the glowing part, the surfaces pretty much looked like plain old rock.

Maybe there's a type of rock that naturally glows? Or maybe the tunnel had been smeared with a special extract? Regardless, as we advanced down the corridor, we tried to silence our footsteps. The possibility of meeting Halcyform down here definitely existed.

We continued to walk for what seemed like an hour. Finally, after two last hairpin turns, the passage ended. And there, mercifully, was a door. It was unlocked. And I sensed someone inside.

"I'm just gonna open it," Gourry said as his hand touched the knob and pushed it open. I nodded in silent agreement.

"Wha—!" We both stood there in shock.

It was a huge—no, *enormous*—room. Now, I know I told you that Daymia's room was big, but this room far surpassed the one containing the ward. Just trust me on this. I mean this thing was *gi*-normous. Inside, row after row of crystal liquid tanks filled with

experimental materials reached the ceiling.

None of that actually surprised us; what was surprising was what was *inside* the tanks.

"Wh-what the heck are they doing *here?"* Gourry wondered aloud.

"Beats me," I said, getting used to the fact that I didn't have any answers anymore.

Inside one of the tanks on the bottom row was a wolf, covered in velvet scales, with innumerable spines growing from its body. Above the wolf were rows of giants, each bald and all with the same face. They slept peacefully, curled up within the Water of Life—the weird goo that contained the essential ingredients for biological function. They were the same creatures that had assaulted Tarim's place under Seigram's command.

We looked toward the center of the room where rows of tanks stood one on top of the other. It was like a chimera bazaar: poisonous snakes with wings, man-eating fish with insect legs, half-dragon-half-troll hybrids, and just about every other freak combination one might imagine. These center-column freaks were so horrific they made the spine-wolves and twin giants appear tasteful. In fact, the groups had nothing in common, save that they were all conceived for combat.

Which begged the question, *who conceived of them?*

It had to have been Halcyform himself. I couldn't imagine how anyone else could have transported them here. That meant that

Halcyform was the one who sent the drones to attack the Tarim residence. But how… ? This thing was getting rather complicated.

"Oh, it's the young miss, is it not?"

*What the hell?* I snapped back around to find the source of the voice behind me. There was no one there.

"What are you doing in a place like this, miss?"

*Where is that voice coming from? It sounded like... hut it couldn't be...*

I'd heard that voice before. I recognized it, but it didn't seem possible. Then… I found it.

There are a couple of different ways I could describe what happened next. What most certainly did *not* happen was me… fainting. Nor did I feel light-headed or dizzy. I simply decided that it would be a good time to sit down. Immediately. On the floor.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Gourry looked to see what it was that made me *retire* to the ground.

It was the head of Tarim the Violet, and it was *still alive.*

"I suppose your shock was inevitable," the head said. It was inside a liquid tank about the size of a goldfish aquarium. The Water of Life solution pumped in and out of the tank through a series of long interconnected tubes.

"Wh—? Wh—?" Still on the floor, I barely managed to get that much out. I was at a loss for words. For whatever reason, the head had the same winking tic that Tarim had when his head was attached

to his body.

"No, you've not gone mad. Though my form is altered, I am most certainly Tarim the Violet."

"B—? B—?" Gourry couldn't get any words out either.

"Oh, I see, yes. You'd like to ask, 'But, what happened to you?'" Tarim said. "You are wondering what circumstances have befallen me, correct?"

Gourry nodded. Thrice.

As for myself, I wanted to know what had happened, sure, but I also wondered how the heck Tarim could sound so casual, what with his body missing and all!

"Hmmm. Where shall I begin… ?" The head gazed off into the distance, contemplating its options. At long last it spoke.

"At first, I did not trust either of you enough to give you a full explanation of the circumstances surrounding your employment. In hindsight, that would appear to have been a grave error on my part. You heard it from him when you released Halcyform from Daymia's ward, did you not? How Daymia and I sealed him within it, that is to say—"

"By *him,"* I interjected, finally able to speak, though my voice was still shaky, "by *him,* you mean Chairman Halcyform?" The head nodded… as much as a head *can* nod when it doesn't have much of a neck.

Gourry remained frozen in shock.

"Yes, that part of Halcyform's story was true, indeed. Did you wonder why we did not simply kill the chairman, if we believed him to be evil?"

"I did wonder about that, but I didn't figure he'd tell me if I asked," I said.

"Of course, of course. Certainly, that is not something asked in polite conversation. The truth, however, is that we did not kill him, because we cannot kill him." Tarim enunciated the word cannot with extraordinary emphasis. *What does he mean by that?*

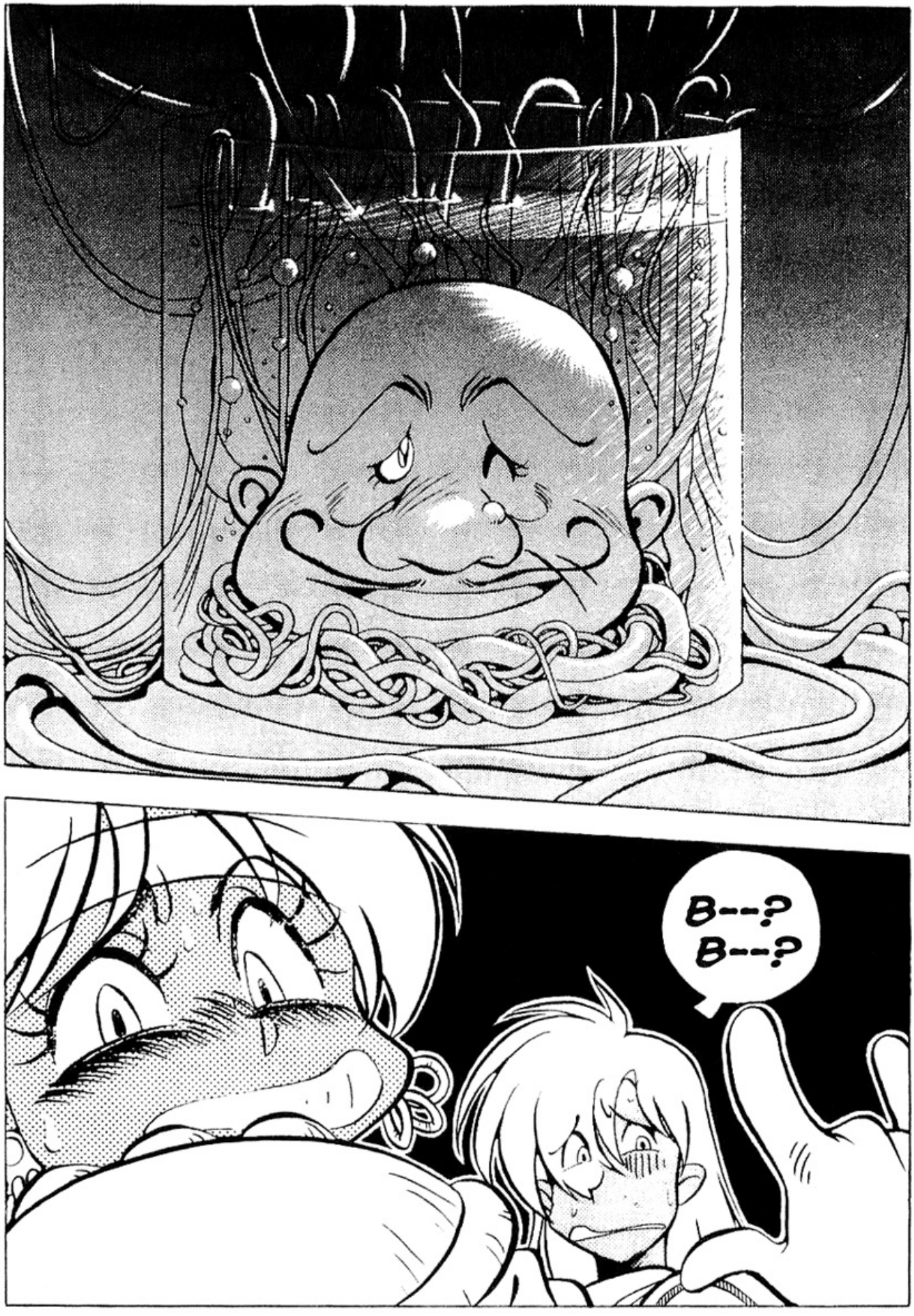
"You once asked me, young miss, what Halcyform had been researching. At the time, I vaguely replied 'life research' or something. In truth, he was researching the means to *immortality."*

"Ohh!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "B-but I thought Daymia was researching immortality. So, it was Halcyform?"

"Well, yes and no. Daymia did perform immortality research. In fact, I have always suspected that Halcyform made Daymia vice chairman as part of a secret deal to further his own research. I believe that he may have seen potential in Daymia's power and unusual creativity. However, contrary to his expectations, no matter how twisted or demented Daymia made his chimeras, he could not enhance their abilities beyond a certain level. I believe that halt in progress is what gradually drove the two toward disillusionment. It was then that I became aware of Halcyform's research—"

"Halcyform's research?" I was almost too afraid to ask. "Yes. Officially, he was researching the preservation and prolonging of life, but one day, a sorcerer came to me in secret. He confessed that

he had infiltrated Halcyform's mansion with the intention of stealing his research, but he had found more than he had expected. Our chairman was not researching *long life,* but *eternal life.* Halcyform had gathered texts from when immortality research was at its zenith, several hundred years ago, and had begun basing experiments on them."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“Experiments?” I asked, eyes wide open.

“Well, there were a series of mysterious disappearances in the city around that time,” Tarim said, then sighed.

*Wha… ?!*

“I see you would have come to the same conclusion,” Tarim continued.

I nodded and consciously gulped for air.

“What the heck’s he talkin’ about?” Gourry piped in out of nowhere.

“He means…” I pulled my eyes away from the head and faced Gourry. “He means that Halcyform abducted people in order to perform research experiments on them.”

*“WHAT?!!”* Gourry freaked out.

“Shhhh! Keep your voice down! This is Halcyform’s house!” I reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, trying to shake it off.

“You verified it, of course?” I asked the head, continuing the previous conversation.

“Of course,” Tarim replied. “I had no idea why he was using humans as experimental subjects. After all, why use abducted citizens when you can specifically create creatures for experimentation, instead? To answer that question, I infiltrated his laboratory.”

Let me interject right here to say that while it is *undisputed* that using citizens as tools for experimentation is unethical and inhumane, whether using creatures of magical origin in their place is any *more* ethical is a matter for academic debate. I tend to think not, but I kept my mouth shut and continued listening.

"It was just as I had feared," he said, and I gasped. "No, it was even worse than I had feared. For *partial* immortality was already in his hands."

"Partial immortality?" A cold sweat began to drip down the back of my neck.

*He couldn't mean…*

I couldn't get Seigram's white mask out of my mind.

"Yes. A pact with a Mazoku," Tarim said, confirming my worst suspicions.

Throughout history, various sorcerers have made pacts with various demons in exchange for immortality. Although existing records are incomplete, it's clear that this is not *total* immortality, but rather *partial* immortality. In exchange, one traded his soul, sealed within a so-called Pledge Stone. The person with partial immortality was eternally young and could not be killed for the duration of the pact. If the Pledge Stone were to be destroyed, or if the demon with whom the pledge was made were to perish, then the immortality was lost.

And *that* was why Seigram had avoided fighting us.

"Once I understood, I began to read every available text about

the search for eternal life, looking for a way to destroy him. I considered presenting my findings to the Guild Council and to Duke Rithahn; however, without a method by which to restrain him, nothing would be gained. In the end, I came to the conclusion that the methods to destroy him were few indeed."

"Defeat the Mazoku, or destroy the Pledge Stone," I said.

"Oh my," Tarim said with his eyes wide open. "You are knowledgeable indeed. But, there is also one other method, of course."

*Another method?*

"Yes. A higher-ranking demon than the one with whom the pact was made can be asked to interfere. Namely, via the spell whose power relies on he who controls all the darkness in this world, the one called Ruby Eye… that is to say, the Dragon Slave. Perhaps *it* is capable of destroying Halcyform," Tarim suggested.

"D-dragon Slave?! That's easy enough *to say."* I was mad now. Dragon Slave—the most powerful attack spell in Black Magic—was said to be the most powerful spell in the world. But…

The head looked directly at me. "You can wield it, can you not? Surely *you can* wield the Dragon Slave, Lina Inverse."

"I can, but if I use it inside the city…" I didn't have to finish that sentence.

"I understand." The head let out a deep sigh. Er, sort of. "It will do far more than simply demolish this manor. If used clumsily, it could destroy half the city. I have seen its effects once before.

However, young miss, I sincerely doubt that Halcyform's ambitions will end with the acquisition of eternal life. All that is certain is that he must be stopped, at all costs."

*Gulp*… I swallowed my breath a bit.

"B-but, if there's another, less dangerous method, like finding and destroying the Pledge Stone, shouldn't we take it?" I asked, hoping he'd agree.

"Yes, most certainly. But the problem is *finding* the stone. For one thing, it could be in any form. I tried, but the best I could do was to use Daymia's ambition for the chairmanship to turn him against Halcyform, to seal him up until—"

"Until he tricked us into releasing him!" I finally understood. By whatever means—most likely telepathy— Halcyform contacted Seigram and had him search for humans who might possess the power to release him from the ward.

Then… we showed up.

When it didn't look like we wanted to get involved, the demons gave us that warning, which, of course, piqued our curiosity and pricked our pride. Then, he used Seigram to lure us inside Daymia's residence. He likely intended to use telepathy to contact us and have us destroy the ward after we'd defeated Daymia. It stung, but the fact remained: trick or no trick, we were the ones who'd released him.

"He brought Rod over to his side and sent his drone assassins to attack my home. You know he smiled as he murdered me? He said, 'As a humble token of thanks for all you have done for me, I have

come to invite you to participate in a little experiment.' Then he cut off my head. The next thing I knew, I was like this—neither dead nor alive. It is likely that he has done something similar to Daymia."

The image of Daymia transformed into a fleshy mass sprang *to* mind. I could have done without that.

"You shouldn't worry yourself over it, miss," Tarim said. He could tell me not to mind a hundred times over, but I was still going to mind.

"He has manipulated us *all,"* he went on. "Neither Daymia nor I ever suspected that Halcyform was pulling the strings. Moreover, even after realizing your power, I was not frank with you about the facts, fearing for the reputation of the Guild Council. That was my mistake, and I accept responsibility for it. I believe, however, that it is not too late for you to accomplish what I could not: I believe you can defeat him."

I nodded resolutely. "We *will* defeat him," I declared. "Count on it."

"Excellent. Then, the only thing I can do for you now is to advise you to be careful," he said. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Oh, there is a request I wish to make of you before you leave this place, if you will hear it."

"Of course. If it's within our power, anything," I promised.

"Would you mind," Tarim asked, "removing these annoying tubes?"

Once again, I was at a loss for words.

The tubes were the only things keeping him alive, and even so, only just barely. Tarim knew that, of course. Consequently, he was asking us…

… to kill him.

"I-I-I…" I stuttered. "I couldn't…"

"Please, young miss," Tarim begged.

"But-but… !"

"Yes, I know what you're thinking. I *am* able to speak and *think*. However, instead of air, I breathe this fluid, and liquid ripples whenever I speak. As if that weren't bad enough, I shall never eat, nor smoke my beloved cigars, ever again. I am no longer… human. There is no meaning or joy in living like this. Tarim the Violet is already dead."

"But, even like this…" I tried again, but stopped.

Even like this, he was still *alive*—I couldn't just… Before I could finish that thought, I felt bloodlust swelling up behind me. Tarim's eyes widened.

"Miss—GET OUT OF THE WAY!" Tarim gurgled.

Gourry grabbed my arm and yanked me to the side. A tornado possessing overwhelming power rushed past my flank. It sped through the space where I had been, and my mantle, trailing behind me, was ripped to shreds. Mr. Tarim's tank, too, was smashed to pieces.

I let out a silent scream.

“Goodness, I missed, didn’t I? Ha ha ha! Well, it would have hit squarely had it not been for that man.”

I slowly turned my head to face…

*...Halcyform the White!*

The chairman was standing silently, his smile unchanged since the last time we had seen him. His eyes, however, contained limitless malice—and madness. “Oh my,” he giggled. “Please don’t look at me with such frightened faces. I thought I might grant you a quick and easy death. I was even willing to forfeit a perfectly useable experimental subject.”

“S-subject, you say?!” My voice broke. I was clearly rattled as I took a step forward.

Gourry, standing beside me, stepped forward as well, having already drawn the Sword of Light.

“Oh my. Do you disapprove of my referring to that talking head as an experimental subject?” Halcyform mused.

“Yes. *Yes,* I disapprove,” I said, dressing up my comment with my best sneer.

“I see.” Halcyform narrowed his eyes. A smile formed on his lips. “And what do you mean to *do* about it?”

*Why, that...!* I ran along the floor, letting loose flare arrows along the way.

Ten flaming arrows flew straight toward Halcyform’s head and…

Direct hit!

Every single one met its mark. I ran past his flank, with Gourry on his other side. As he passed, the Sword of Light drove into Halcyform's chest. The two of us peeked behind as we dove into the tunnel. We felt bloodlust on our backs.

"Dammit! That partial immortality's a pain in the butt!" Gourry shouted.

I'd understood from the beginning that our opponent was immortal until the stone was destroyed. But even having gotten that, actually seeing what he could withstand with my own eyes was startling.

Behind us, I heard him casting a spell. From its rhythm, I figured out what it had to be and I hurriedly began chanting the counter-spell.

I glanced behind me. There! *Flare arrows!* Just as I thought! An eye for an eye, huh? I waved my right hand behind me in a wide arc.

"Mos Varim!" I shouted, and the ball of glittering white light I shot out drew an irregular pattern in the air as it deflected Halcyform's arrows.

"What?!" Halcyform froze in shock.

When I had learned that spell, its sole purpose was to extinguish fires. Shortly after, I figured out that it was also effective against popular fire element attack spells like *fireball* and *flare arrow.*

With some sense left in us, Gourry and I ran out of the tunnel as fast as we could. Upon reaching the basement, I launched a pair of *Dam Brass* spells, collapsing the tunnel's entrance. I figured that

would buy us a little time—more than enough to escape. However, I didn't figure it was enough time to find the stone we were looking for. First of all, we had no idea what the Pledge Stone looked like. It had been magically constructed, so it should have magical characteristics of some sort. But that was too little to go on. We had almost no chance of finding it. Still, this was no time for a temporary withdrawal. If we gave Halcyform half a chance, he'd make sure that we never got another.

"Let's get out of here!" I shouted.

"We're not gonna look around?!" Gourry seemed skeptical.

"It's not here!" I ran up the stairs to halt any further questioning. I wouldn't have been surprised if Halcyform had hidden something moderately valuable here, but there was no way he would stash the stone his life depended on in a place like this. It might get broken by mistake. That's not to say I imagined he'd rented a safety deposit box or anything… *So where could it be?* I thought as I went.

At this point, being stealthy was no longer advantageous. I cast a lighting spell against the ceiling as I ran upstairs. Gourry was right behind me. The door to the basement opened, and a red-haired woman stood facing us. She must've heard sounds coming from the basement.

"It's about time!" I shouted, grabbing Rubia by the neck before she could get more than an *um* out. In no mood for debate, I pressed her against the wall. "Now you'll tell us, won't you?"

As I spoke, she looked frightened. My face was apparently displaying a fair bit of bloodthirstiness.

“Where does the chairman keep his Pledge Stone?” I demanded.

“Calm down, Lina.” Gourry looked a little frightened himself. I ignored his remonstration and looked the girl straight in the eye.

There was a deep sadness in her demeanor that surprised me. I loosened my grip.

“If…” Rubia began in a soft voice. “If you find the stone, can you stop him? Can you stop Master Halcyform?”

“What do you mean, ‘stop him’?” I asked, removing my hand from the nape of her neck.

“I know what he’s done,” she said. “I’ve tried to convince him to stop many times. But he still…” She bit her tongue and lowered her head.

She couldn’t stop him, and that was why she’d asked me not to get involved—so that Halcyform would never be freed from Tarim and Daymia’s seal.

“You didn’t consider talking to someone like Duke Rithahn?” Gourry asked.

“Hey,” I said, sighing as I spoke. “It goes without saying she did. Sure, it would be easy for her to talk to someone. But then Halcyform would just kill that person, and she’d blame herself. Right? The point being, there wasn’t anyone around here with a serious chance of taking him down.” Rubia gulped and nodded. I put a hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes.

“You understand,” I began, “that stopping Halcyform means destroying him, right?”

She nodded once more. “Yes. I-I understand.”

“All right, it’s settled then,” I said. “So, about the Pledge Stone?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know which stone it is,” she sighed. “But he’s used large crystal divination balls for years now.”

*Boom!* Her words were interrupted by a thunderous roar reverberating past us. It came from the basement. Had he already broken through?!

“Good enough! Lead the way!” I shouted. Rubia broke into a run.

I sensed a strong bloodlust behind us as we hightailed it down the corridor. There was something peculiar about it, though… unfocused. I glanced behind me….

*Eeeeeek!*

Our old friends, the giant combat homunculi, had come to pay us a visit—and they’d brought plenty of their chimera pals along for the fun.

Whether or not Halcyform knew the corridor was blocked, the rubble was no match for the chimeras he’d released from the laboratory tanks—they simply plowed right through it. We wouldn’t be able to stay ahead of them much longer. Making matters worse, the corridor was wide enough for them to apply their superior numbers against us. And moreover, I’d just about had enough of them!

I turned my head toward them as I pressed my right hand against

the wall of the corridor. “Van Rehl!” I shouted, and dozens of icy threads radiated from my palm, twisting over the walls and floor. They crept across the ceiling as well, then into the center of the corridor—just as the army of chimeras arrived. The icy threads wrapped around the chimeras’ feet, then crept higher. In an instant, they became a collection of ice-covered statues. That would stop them for a while, I thought.

Gourry and I resumed running with all available speed.

“I’m wondering…,” I said to no one in particular, “why the heck did he build a wacko army of chimeras in the first place?”

“He said they were part of his research,” Rubia answered. “He was looking for ways to strengthen their vitality.”

That was *it?!* He was randomly trying anything that might make for a better combat chimera? I was immediately sorry I’d asked.

“Here!” Rubia pointed to a set of stairs leading to the second floor.

Just as I mounted the staircase, I heard a loud buzzing sound and sensed an immediate bloodlust behind me. I turned and ducked in one smooth motion, and a low whooshing sound almost deafened me as something passed right over my head.

*Dodged it!*

... Or, I thought I had, anyway, until something heavy clobbered my back.

*Thud!* Ugh! Jeez, I collapsed onto the stairs, landing forehead-first.

*Th-that hurt…!*

Good thing I didn't have time to sit around feeling sorry for myself, huh? I got it together in a hurry. Then *that thing* landed on the top of the stairway. Let me tell you, it was *nasty* looking. It made lesser demons look like cuddly bunnies by comparison. Wings protruded from its back, which was covered in a sickly white skin. The best I could figure, it was the troll-dragon hybrid we'd seen in the laboratory earlier. It had probably flown over the heads of the chimeras that I'd nabbed with the *Van Rehl* spell.

*How do I get myself into these things?*

"You okay, Lina ?!" Gourry asked.

It was the hybrid's tail that had slammed into my back, after it missed with a claw attack. Getting knocked down sure *hurt,* but it hadn't done any real damage.

“I’m okay! Anyway, I gotta get rid of this guy.” I didn’t have much time to waste—Halcyform was coming.

“These things breathe fire, don’t they?” Gourry asked, as Rubia took cover behind him.

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “It won’t.” There was no way Halcyform was going to let something run around the place shooting fire and potentially burning his house down.

The dragon-troll leapt! Gourry drew his sword as I chanted a spell. With a single blow, Gourry thrust through its thick hide, deep into its chest. The creature raised a claw and swung.

“Damn!” Gourry cursed. There wasn’t time for him to pull his sword out. He jumped down onto the stairs, leaving his weapon stuck inside the monster’s chest. Rubia hurriedly moved to the side, barely managing to avoid a swat from its tail.

“Bam Rod!” I let my spell loose as soon as Gourry and Rubia were out of the way The flaming whip that extended from my hand should have turned that thing into a *real* hothead!

*Aw, rats!* So much for my witty banter: The dragon-troll’s maw bit my whip in two!

*How the heck did it do that?!*

Even infused with magic, fire is fire. Since dragons are particularly strong against fire, I certainly knew this sort of thing was *possible,* but it seemed highly *improbable.*

No time to ponder the hows and whys—that thing was fixing its sights on me. I drew my sword, knowing there was no way my

strength or skill at swordsmanship would be enough to deliver the lethal blow.

After a moment's hesitation, I tossed my sword to Gourry "Gourry, catch!"

"Got it!" he shouted, dashing after his flying foe. I began chanting a spell.

Gourry sliced off one of the creature's wings, causing it to lose its balance and plummet. However, just as before, Gourry's blade got stuck in the beast's left shoulder. The thing roared as it whipped its tail up.

"Ugh!" Gourry grunted as the tip of its tail knocked him against the rail. The creature reared up…

"Dam Brass!" I cried.

*Direct hit!*

*This* time, my spell landed, and the creature—um— "lost his head," so to speak. Even still, its body continued to thrash around.

"Die already, you stubborn little pain in the butt," said Gourry.

"He kind of reminds me of you," I said with a chuckle. "I figure you'd get along just fine without your head. I mean, it's not like you use it or anything. I bet frying would kill you, though."

"Hello! I can hear you! What am I, a cockroach?" He looked my way and sighed.

"What?" Like he'd never give me a hard time just for the fun of it?

"I think *your* head's on crooked," he said.

*Is that all you've got, Gourry? C'mon…*

"It must've gotten that way when I landed on it earlier!" I growled. "Ugh! Never mind that; hurry!" And we both extracted our swords from the monster carcass.

"The second floor!" Rubia urged us on.

At least a dozen doors lined a long corridor that stretched left to right. Gargoyles stood beside all the doors, each of the same design and each with a stone ball in its mouth. The effect was pretty creepy.

Gargoyles, as you may or may not know, are mystic beasts that look exactly like stone statues. A careless person could easily find himself fending off an attack from what he had *assumed* was merely a decorative object.

Under ordinary circumstances, Gourry and I could take out a small army of gargoyles without too much trouble, but frankly, we didn't have time to play.

I looked at Rubia hastily. "Are these statues or *real* gargoyles?" Or *worse,* I thought. *Could they be a mix of each?*

"It's all right," she said. "I've dusted and cleaned them many times. They're statues. Once, I remember Master Halcyform calling the red crystal ball, 'My precious stone.' The others are, to the best of my knowledge, ordinary stones. But I remember his attachment to that one."

"Sounds promising—let's find it. Which statue did he put it in?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rubia sighed. “All he told me was to be very careful when I was cleaning the second floor statues.”

“Great. I guess we’ll have to check them all one by one, then—”

“—I don’t think you’re going to have the *time.”* Someone cut me off.

*Who the—?!*

The speaker slowly emerged from the corridor’s shadows. First his feet, then his robes, then… a white mask under a hood.

“Seigram!” Cold sweat dripped down my back.

*Did Halcyform call him here telepathically?*

“You could have used the time you earned to save your own lives, but you refused, preferring to create even greater chaos. Rather foolish creatures, you humans are,” Seigram purred.

“We were hoping you’d show up to crash our party,” I bluffed. “If we destroy you, Halcyform loses his immortality, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. But that’s a big *if,* of course.”

*Rub it in, why don’tcha?*

He threw my words right back at me, and he was right. Worse still, if Halcyform showed up with his partial immortality we’d be completely out of options.

Still, we had a chance. I didn’t detect any sign of Gio Gaia’s presence. We might be able to settle things with Seigram alone, or if we could just find that Pledge Stone.

Those were the only options I saw.

Well, okay, there was always the Dragon Slave option, of course, but if I released that here, it could destroy the city.

"We'll *destroy* you," I threatened. "And we'll do it before your friends arrive."

"Oops! Too late, I'm afraid," came a singsong voice.

*Huh?!*

I froze for a second, then timidly looked behind me. There he stood, calm and glowing in his white mantle and flowing robe.

"I'm already here."

*Halcyform the White!*

He still had the same creepy smile on his face.

"Now, now, Rubia. Do come over here," he summoned her in a gentle tone.

Rubia refused. "Please, Master Halcyform. Please let this end."

"What are you saying, Rubia? Everything I've done, I've done for you, my sweet. This is all because I do not wish to lose you again."

"No!!" she screamed. "What you're pursuing is nothing more than an illusion! I'm… I'm not the Miss Rubia that you loved! She's *dead!* No matter… no matter how many times you call me by her name, I'm… I'm nothing but a *monster!* A living Rubia puppet that you constructed!"

*Eh, saywhatnow?*

"Rubia! That isn't so…" Halcyform's face registered shock, then sadness. "You are my Rubia, and none other. You are my precious —"

"Lord Halcyform," Seigram interrupted them both with a heavy tone. "Let us set aside this *nonsense* until later—"

"*Nonsense,* you say?!" Halcyform glared at Seigram. For a moment, there was silence. Then, Halcyform exhaled.

"Very well. I will deal with the matter at hand. Seigram, you stay right where you are and observe."

"As you wish," Seigram replied with a scorn-filled tone.

"Master Halcyform!" Rubia pleaded.

"Rubia, you better get out of the way," I warned.

"Why?" She stared at me, dumbfounded.

"One way or another, we have to settle this," I said.

"So it would seem," Halcyform agreed. Gourry nodded silently.

"Tarim believed that your objectives extended far beyond mere immortality," I said, stalling as Gourry drew the Sword of Light.

"Not true! Immortality is all I ever wanted. I simply wish to never lose that which is precious to me, ever again," Halcyform replied matter-of-factly.

A thought crept into the back of my mind.

I didn't think I could beat Halcyform head-to-head, but if

Seigram were destroyed, then Halcyform would lose his immortality. Precisely for that reason, Seigram wasn't going to enter the fray. He'd run away if he weren't destroyed with a single blow. If he ran, we'd be *toast*. Was there any chance that We could take him down with one shot? Gio Gaia, his underling, had Survived a direct hit from an Elmekia Lance, but…

…it wasn't like we had any *other* options.

Halcyform raised his right hand to signal the start of battle. A quiet spell slipped through his lips. At the exact same time, Gourry and I broke into a run across the floor. I drew my sword as I chanted my spell. Halcyform finished his, and at that instant, Gourry leapt left and I leapt right.

It was a very simple feint, but it was enough to make Halcyform hesitate for a moment. He might have been immortal, but he wasn't used to fighting his own battles.

I finished chanting my spell. "Flare Bid!"

And with that, dozens of tiny orbs of light exploded around Halcyform.

"Gah!" His form momentarily vanished within the smoke and flames.

"The stone!" I screamed.

"Right!" Gourry was on it. He swung the Sword of Light at the nearest gargoyle, bisecting the stone ball in its mouth. Dozens of flare arrows flew out of the weakening cloud around Halcyform—he was firing them at random. The two of us dodged them effortlessly.

A stray shot whipped around behind us, straight toward the face of Seigram, who was still standing back there, observing.

*I'm going to laugh really hard if that hits.*

Just as the thought sprang to mind, Seigram of the White Mask ducked.

*Bummer.*

Of course, there wasn't any reason why a spell with physical fire properties would hurt a demon like him, anyway—even as a direct hit. Still, I would have liked to have seen it.

I unleashed my next spell before the explosions from the first one completely dissipated. "Balus Rod!"

Halcyform wasn't my target this time. My whip smashed the heads of a pair of gargoyles along with the jewels they held in their mouths. Since I didn't have any idea which stone was the Pledge Stone, I figured I'd just have to destroy them*all*. It wasn't the soundest of plans, but it was all I had.

"Ack!" The color drained from Halcyform's face when he realized what I was up to. "Fireball!" he shouted, and a great burning ball of light flew in my direction.

"Uh-oh!" Gourry grabbed the statue that had fallen at his feet and hurled it in the direction of the fireball.

*Direct hit!* The fireball met the statue in midair, and crimson flames spiraled in every direction. Using a gargoyle as a shield, I managed to evade the flaming arrows pouring from above.

As Gourry leapt forward, one of the flare arrows hit right at his feet! He lost his balance, flailed around in midair, then reached for one of the gargoyles with his left hand. He somehow managed to regain his balance while using the gargoyle for support.

*I'm sure he planned it that way. Showoff!*

He stayed there for a second, then pop! The crystal ball he'd grabbed detached from the gargoyle's mouth, and Gourry fell squarely on his butt, crystal in hand. I wished I'd had time to laugh.

"Gourry!" I called out, "That stone!"

"No!" Halcyform's complexion darkened. Gourry understood.

I began chanting a spell.

"This ends…" Gourry began as he brought the Sword of Light down, "here!!" The stone in his hands shattered into a thousand pieces… just like any other stone would.

"Nooo!" Halcyform cried out in pain.

"Dam Brass!" My spell struck him directly in the chest.

"We did it!" Gourry celebrated.

And then…

Halcyform's showers of flaming arrows rained down on us once more!

"Ugh!" Gourry grunted in frustration. No, not frustration—*pain!* He was favoring his left foot. He'd been hit by fragments from the earlier explosion!

*This isn't good. But how could… ?*

"That's impossible," Gourry muttered. His forehead beaded with sweat.

The figure of Halcyform stood before us, silent as ever. Anger burned in his eyes.

"Didn't we destroy the Pledge Stone?!" Gourry asked.

Halcyform got a funny look on his face. "The *Pledge Stone*?" His lips curled into an icy smile. "You thought that was the Pledge Stone, did you?" He laughed, which was not a good sign.

"Yeah, so?" I said as my eyes shot over to Rubia.

"I see. Rubia told you, did she?" Halcyform, too, shifted his gaze in her direction. "Rubia, I understand how you must feel, and I promise that I will discuss it with you later.

"Mr. Gourry." Halcyform turned to us. "What you destroyed was a simple memory orb containing data relevant to my research. It was rather important to me at one time, though not any longer. It would seem that Rubia led you astray."

*No way!*

Oh well. Couldn't blame the kid for trying. So we had to find the Pledge Stone this time. If there was another way, I couldn't think of it.

"Still, I do deserve an apology for the destruction of my memory orb, at the very least." He sneered as he targeted Gourry. I sprinted toward my friend.

“Fireball!” said Halcyform, hurling his orb of light.

“Ray Wing!” I countered, grabbing Gourry. We both flew into the air, and the fireball burst a split second behind us. The blast propelled us further than I had expected, slamming us into the ceiling. I sensed scorn emanating from Seigram.

*Wait a second!* Something resembling an idea burned its way into my head. I drew my sword from its sheath as I regained control over my Ray Wing spell. Shifting my weight, I adjusted our trajectory away from the wall—and toward Seigram.

“Wha—!” Seigram called out. It was too late to dodge me.

“Seigram, get down!” Halcyform bellowed, as I brought my steel down hard against his white mask.

*Seigram the Formless, the demon bearing a mask of stone…*

“Gaaaaaaah!” Halcyform’s scream rang forth.

*Crunch!* Though I decelerated as fast as I could, I didn’t quite make it in time and we slammed into the wall anyway. Luckily for me, Gourry’s spine bore the brunt of the impact—though it did make an unpleasant cracking noise. I helped him up.

“Lina?” he began. “Did you use me as a cushion *on purpose?”*

“Oh, you *wish,”* I replied with a laugh, repressing my own pain.

Seigram frantically attempted to pick up the scattered fragments of his mask.

“Ohh…” Seigram moaned as he looked (as much as someone without a face can *look)* down at the broken shards in his hands.

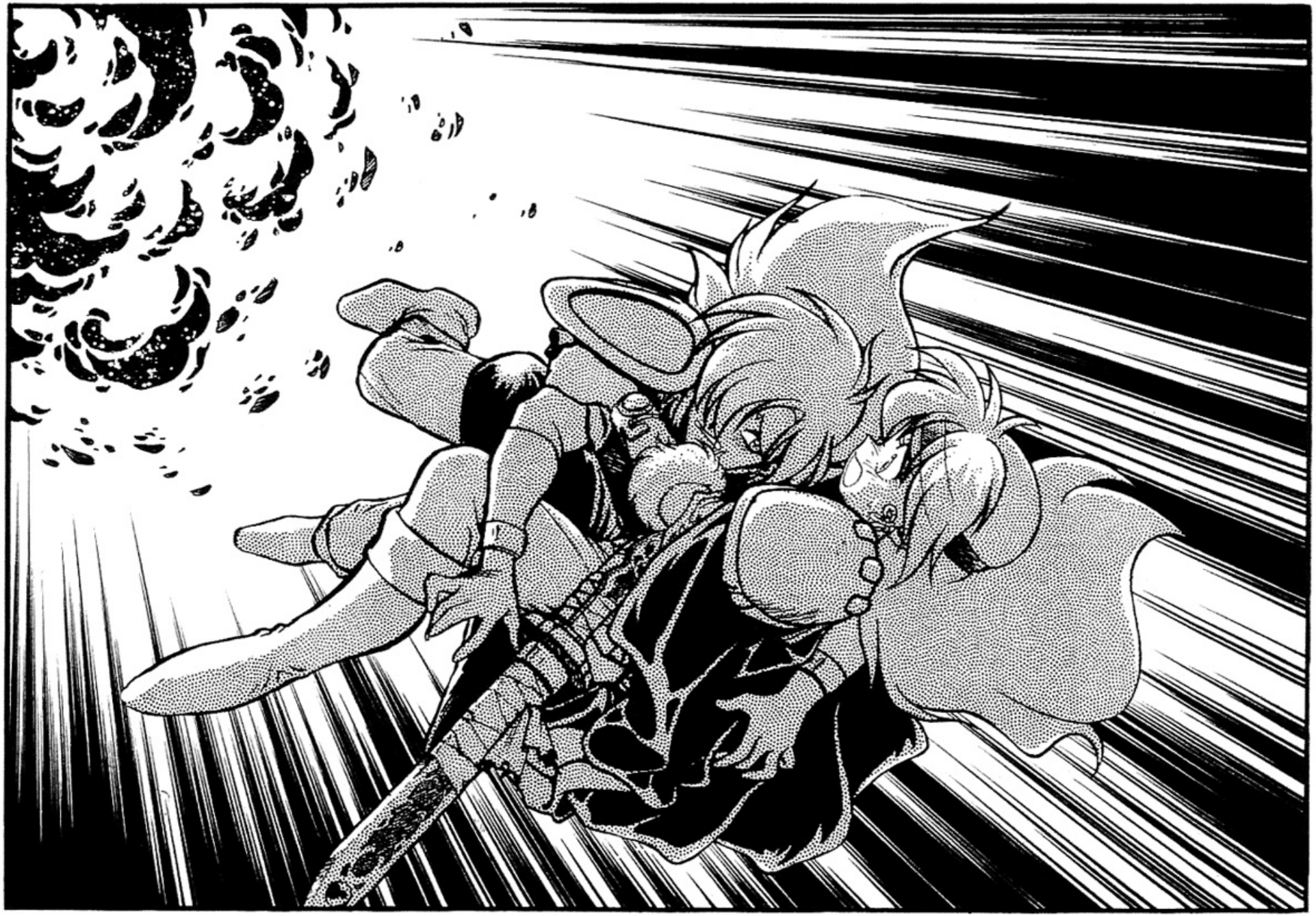
“My… my Pledge Stone…”

“His *what?!”* Gourry erupted.

*His Pledge Stone… haven’t you been listening?*

The Pledge Stone was the white stone mask that had covered Seigram’s “face” all along. *That’s* why Seigram wouldn’t fight us. That mask wasn’t covering anything—he Was *formless,* remember?

“S-Seigram!” Halcyform howled miserably, kneeling on the floor as he cried. His body, having lost its immortality, was suffering an onslaught of pain and exhaustion. “Destroy them!” he ordered.



“Quiet, you!” The fireball I shot at him seared his flesh.

Rubia averted her eyes as the White Sorcerer was reduced to pieces where he’d stood.

“Now, then…” I turned toward Seigram.

“When the stone that bore the inscription of our pact was destroyed, my obligation to obey his commands came to an end,” Seigram said plainly. That was rather honorable of him to say, particularly for a Mazoku.

I was exhausted, and, if at all avoidable, I didn’t want to fight anymore.

“However…”

Oh, I knew that was too good to be true.

“I cannot depart without settling things,” he said, “if for no other reason than for the sake of my pride.”

Oh, goody. Well, I wouldn’t want to injure a demon’s pride.

Seigram casually—and noiselessly—leapt forward, landing beside Halcyform’s remains. “Let us begin!” A ball of blue-white flames formed between his palms.

I leapt. Gourry twisted his body, barely managing to evade the strike. The ball collided with the wall behind him, exploding on impact, and before he knew it, Gourry was riding the blast!

“Take *this!”* he responded, and thrust the Sword of Light before him.

Seigram's body was suddenly shrouded in darkness. For all intents and purposes, he simply vanished. He certainly proved his card-carrying demon race status, didn't he?

"What the heck?!" Gourry landed, his surprise attack foiled. His balance was way off; his injuries must have been much more serious than I'd thought.

"Gourry! Run!" I yelled. He bolted forward, end over end, as a Plasma Ball exploded behind him!

"Gaah!" He smashed a gargoyle statue to bits—with his *face*. The Sword of Light fell from his hands.

"Gourry!" I called. He wasn't moving.

"Now then…" Seigram turned around slowly to "face" me. "It seems that you are alone."

*So Seigram can cross through darkness….*

"Elmekia Lance!" I cried.

Just as I figured he would, Seigram disappeared into darkness once more. He'd evaded my attack with ease. From behind me I sensed a presence emerging, and I hurriedly looked back, only to find a flaming sphere hurtling right between my eyes.

"Waah!" I bent backward and managed somehow to dodge it. It came so close, though, that I think it actually singed my nose hairs.

What? Like you don't have nose hairs…

I threw away my sword, drawing a small knife with the same hand. A thin silver ray pierced the air. I plunged the knife through

Seigram's shadow, pinning it to the ground.

*Shadow Snap,* that's called. It's a spell used to seal an opponent's movements from the Astral side. Since demons are basically Astral life forms, it's especially effective against them.

"Ho! Pinning my shadow… clever. An impressive stunt for a human," Seigram said while motionless. I wanted to lob a witty retort right back at him, but this wasn't an opponent to toy with. I began chanting an Elmekia Lance spell.

"I confess, I do resent arrogance, however…"

*Creep.*

Then I heard something and stopped what I was doing to look. The fissure in the wood where I'd stuck my knife was slowly closing, pushing the knife out and threatening to release my captive.

*Clang!* The floor spat the knife out, and Seigram began to move again.

"Come now, you didn't really think that shadow stunt would do any more than create a brief diversion, did you?"

A girl can dream, can't she?

I continued the spell I'd interrupted. "Elmekia Lance!"

The demon's form vanished into the darkness. Dammit! A flare arrow fired from behind me and scorched by my flank. Seigram reemerged behind Gourry's collapsed form. Next to him was the Sword of Light.

I ran.

“Fireball!!” My orb shot past Gourry, exploding at Seigram’s feet. The blast carried pieces of the floor with it. And also carried… the Sword of Light.

I extended my right hand and hoped.

“Fool!” Seigram cried. The Mazoku emerged through a crack in the smoke. Ignoring the fireball, he chanted the spell he thought would finish me off.

“Are you trying to slay your comrade?!” he asked, outraged. “My fire spell will prove far more effective at that!”

The light was blinding as he extended his hand in my direction. He intended a direct hit, no pussyfooting around this time.

I didn’t have time to cast a spell; however…

“Light come forth!” I called, and the blade of light thrust deep into Seigram’s dark body. I had impaled him with the Sword of Light.

“Noooooooo!” Seigram’s roar reverberated for what must have been hours and miles. The upper half of his body shuddered and lurched, his right hand waving high in the air.

“Wh-when did you…?” Seigram asked incredulously. Guess he didn’t see me catch the sword. The previous fireball was not meant as an attack. My goal had been to scoot the Sword of Light closer to me. The impact flung it up, and I caught it.

Of course, that’s easy enough to *say.* And, I must confess, I wasn’t all that confident it was going to work. However, faced with Seigram’s ability to leap through space itself, I couldn’t defeat him

without a special trick of my own. Beyond that, I gambled and I won.

"D-damn you… damn you!" Seigram gathered energy in his right hand for one last strike.

*Oh yeah. Like I'd let him take a parting blow!*

*"Perish!"* With all of my strength, I drove the Sword of Light down into him. The demon split in two.

Unable to even raise his voice enough for dying words, Seigram stumbled back several steps, falling to one knee.

It was over… finally.

"No… not yet," the Mazoku muttered.

*How the—?!*

"I am… not… yet… destroyed," he gasped.

*Well, why the hell not?!*

The Sword of Light's destructive capacity is in direct proportion to the strength of the wielder's will. If driving all of my will into a single blow wasn't enough to destroy him, then what the hell was it gonna take?

"Someday… I… will… !" Seigram's body faded into the darkness before he could finish his sentence. Not good!

If he got away now, he'd be a lot of trouble later. I wouldn't be able to rest easy knowing someone like him was still around.

"Oh no, you don't!" I cursed and I brought the Sword of Light

down hard through the air.

Sadly, all I sliced were the remnants of a dark haze. He got away.

*So much for resting easy…*

"Someday, we'll settle this, Seigram," I swore aloud. "One way or another."

Funny, even down to the very end I kept expecting Gio Gaia to pop out of nowhere, but he didn't show. And since I still didn't sense his presence, I figured our chances of running into each other again were pretty small. I breathed a sigh of relief that had been a long time coming.

I turned my attention to Gourry, still lying on the ground. I assessed his wounds, and thankfully he hadn't sustained any permanent damage.

Then, I got a knot in my gut.

"Miss Lina!" Rubia cried out. Bloodlust surged up behind me.

*Did I count Gio Gaia out too soon?!*

A hot mass struck my back. I was thrust forward, colliding chest-first with the stone. It knocked the wind right out of me, and I momentarily lost consciousness.

I willed my body awake just in time for—

"Waah!" I cried out as *unbearable* pain tore through me. Somehow, I was able to turn my head just enough to see.

The Sword of Light had been knocked away by the strength of

the impact, and it lay at the feet of…

*…Halcyform the White!*

His arms looked unnaturally long from this angle. Maybe I was seeing things? His white hair was all in a jumble, possibly from the fierce fighting. However…

*Why is his left eye green and glowing?*

"It couldn't be," I muttered. "Gio… *Gio Gaia?"*

"Gio Gaia no longer exists," Halcyform said with a lurid smile on his face. "As punishment for failing to kill you, I *consumed* him."

*You did* what *now?!*

Halcyform casually glanced at the Sword of Light at his feet and kicked it behind him, well out of my reach.

"Rubia, do come pick that up. It will make for interesting experiments later on," he said, glancing in her direction.

"In my immortality research, I came across an old scroll," Halcyform said. "That scroll was an instructional manual used to help the reader consume another being's soul and acquire its strengths and abilities."

"So, th-then you…" I hated that my voice was shaking.

The White Sorcerer nodded silently and, as always, smiled.

"As I expected, consuming him has extended my life and heightened my capabilities. I chose an excellent subject, indeed."

"Mazoku…," I muttered.

“Indeed. Consuming him was, of course, not very easy. That is why I instructed Gio to fight you. In a weakened state, he would be more suitable for my experiment.”

*Now I get it…*

So *that’s* why he didn’t tell Gio about the Sword of Light.

Also, because he ingested the Mazoku’s vitality, he was able to stay alive even after his immortality pact had been destroyed and he’d taken a direct hit from my flare arrow.

“I believe I’ve had enough of this conversation,” Halcyform said, taking a step forward. Under the circumstances, I was at a severe handicap.

My body wasn’t in any kind of condition for evasive action. If I couldn’t cast my spell first and hit Halcyform squarely, I’d lose. In fact, even if I *did* hit him squarely with an Elmekia Lance, one shot wouldn’t likely be enough to destroy him.

“Fear not, little sorceress,” Halcyform cooed creepily. “I most certainly do not intend to kill you. I have plans for you, my dear. First, I think I’ll use you to create drones with more powerful magical capacity, and *then* we’ll start dreaming up experiments to conduct on *you.*”

*A* chill ran up my spine.

“Have you considered just consuming me?” I asked. “I mean, I’m cute, I’m sure I’m tasty, and my abilities might allow you to live indefinitely.” I was stalling, of course.

“That’s enough!” Rubia shrieked.

Halcyform looked back. With sad determination, Rubia wielded the Sword of Light in both of her shaking hands. She was resolute. You could see it in her crystal-clear eyes.

“Rubia?” the White Sorcerer muttered, visibly shaken.

“Just please stop this! Any more… and I’ll… I’ll…” She didn’t want to have to say it.

“What are you saying, Rubia? This is ridiculousness. Now, stop waving that sword around and take it downstairs. It’s all right, it’ll all be over soon.”

She looked like she was going to burst into tears at any moment. “Yes, yes it will.”

“Now do as I say, my precious Rubia,” Halcyform ordered, not getting what she meant.

“No!” Rubia cried as she charged toward Halcyform.

“Rubia!” Halcyform stretched out his right hand, and a light began to glow in his palm.

*Rubia! Look out!*

Their silhouettes blended in a near-blinding burst. And I didn’t quite know what to say.

Halcyform, who couldn’t bring himself to fight back against Rubia, had been run through by the Sword of Light. He’d never released the fireball in his hand.

“Please, Master Halcyform, make it stop,” Rubia managed to say through a sob, her face buried in his chest.

“It seems… that I shall…” And with the same hand that he couldn’t bring to fight against her, Halcyform gently stroked Rubia’s hair. She looked up at him, and he returned her gaze not with the smug grin he’d worn since we first saw him, but with a genuine smile—the tender smile of a happy man.

“I had thought that… there was no opponent… who could defeat me… but… Rubia… if it is you who destroys me… then all is as it must be.” A serene expression befell him as the last bits of strength left his body.

And *that* is how the sorcerer who sought immortality met his end.

# Epilogue

There's something to be said for boring days. Boring days are entirely underrated if you ask me. You know the kind of day I'm talking about? Days when the weather is entirely unremarkable—not too hot, not too cool, and the sky is clear, and strangers are going about their business, and no one is trying to kill you. *Boring days like today are nice to have, from time to time.*

"It's like it never happened at all," Gourry sighed, a little bewildered.

"That's a pretty somber observation, coming from you." I laughed.

Gourry rubbed my head, ruffling my hair.

"Hey! Don't touch the hair! I didn't mean it like it was a bad thing." I swatted his hand away from my head as I spoke.

"You're making it sound like I said the sky was falling on us!" he argued.

"Maybe I'll be reincarnated as a catfish!" Leave it to me to find the bright side.

Gourry and I turned along the main street toward the city's eastern gate. It had been about ten days since we'd wrapped things up, and we'd finally recovered from the damage we'd incurred while taking care of this, that, and the other thing. We were pretty much back to our old selves. I wished the same could be said for the rest of our fellow compatriots.

I suppose Rubia was the one I most felt sorry for.

Lantz had left the city as soon as his wounds had healed. He said he wanted to see the sights in Sairaag.

Daymia? I don't know what happened to him exactly. If the legends are true, he won't die until the caster of the Raugnut Rushavna—Seigram—is destroyed. I don't like to think about it too much, honestly.

*We* had to answer questions from the higher-ups on the Sorcerers' Guild Council, but we tried to keep our answers vague for Rubia's sake. She'd gone through enough already.

As long as we kept mum about what Halcyform had done, she could continue to live on his estate and try to make something of a life for herself.

If it had come down to it, I would have argued self-defense on her behalf, but I felt that keeping the Guild in the dark was the best way to give her some measure of peace.

As for what kind of life she could have without Halcyform… Well, I didn't really have an answer to that one. I could have asked her about it, I guess, or offered to talk to her about the subject, but for some reason, it didn't seem like the thing to do. Sometimes it's better just to mind your own business.

As for the two of us?

"So, where to next?" Gourry asked. Neither of us had any place in particular where we needed to go, so without a clear destination in mind, we considered our options.

I'd heard rumors there were some interesting things happening in Saillune. We could go check it out. Or, it might be fun to go back to Zephilia—I hadn't been back in an age. Wait a minute—where the heck did Gourry's family live?

"I dunno," I winked. "Let's just decide on the way."

And so, Atlas City melted into the horizon behind us… .

# Afterword

(Looking around nervously)

Okay, she's not here… better be quick!

Nice to meet you! I'm the author. Since there are no weirdoes getting in the way, I can show my face this time.

I want to thank you for making my last work so popular that I've been invited to produce a sequel. So thank you for reading *Slayers: The Sorcerer of Atlas,* thank you for sending fan mail, and thank you, Fujida-san, for giving me that commemorative *Teacup of Justice.* (Ah, tea tastes so much better now.)

Really, I can't thank you enough.

Now, let's talk about *this* novel—

(THWACK!)

Ugh!

(Thud! Rumble, rumble…)

L: … Gotcha! That's what you get for thinking you can ignore me and give commentary all by yourself!

Minion S, you took it easy on him when you whacked him. Look! He's not even *bleeding.*

S: He wasn't even gonna let me come out this time. Sheesh. I don't ask for much, but mentioning my name would be nice.

L: Yeah, I agree! Squish him again, just like last time, and

I'll take over the postscript this time, as well.

Okay, um, everything you've read until now is strictly *off the record*. Hmmm… but what I said last time was off the record and it appeared in print, didn't it? Well that won't happen this time! Or I'll have an editor's hide!

Now, then… let's try it again, shall we?

(A moment later…)

Hi, Official Author Spokeswoman "L" here! The author had intended to write the postscript this time, but it seems he isn't physically up to the task. I wonder what happened? I'm a little concerned for him. He should start taking better care of himself.

(Minion S! Stop laughing behind my back!)

Er… never mind that. Anyway…

Thanks to our readers, the author has received lots and lots of fan mail. But, since the author s such a lazy dirtbag, he hasn't been able to reply to it all. Everyone whack him like a pinata!

Some of you who wrote in tried to guess my true identity, but only *one* of you actually got it right. The author said he'd write back to the person who guessed correctly, but…

Well, that's *his* problem!

This volume of *Slayers: The Sorcerer of Atlas* was altered to reflect the author's birth date. So, aren't you dying to know what it is?

The first ten people who actually know will receive a telephone

card from Fantasia Collection, personally signed by Hajime Kanzaka. So do try to get it right.

Anyway, this time the author set up lots and lots of foreshadowing only to completely ignore it all, huh? Last time there was that embarrassing episode where Lina couldn't use spells. This time he brought out *Raugnut Rushavna* and some pretty strong Mazoku. (Sheesh, it's one thing after another!)

As for the next volume, the author hasn't been one hundred percent firm on this, but it looks like it's going to involve the legacy of the Red Priest.

Also, at some point Lina's probably going to be setting out on a few solo adventures.

(That twisted author might have something really out of the blue in store for her.)

Anyway, in the next novel, when Lina's destiny hits a rocky patch, is Gourry going to stick with her, or ditch her midway? Is *Volume 3* going to include characters from the *Dragon Magazine* serials? Is the Ruby-Eyed Demon Lord going to return? And when shall I, "L," make my first appearance? Damn you, Kanzaka! Let me out!

Ahem…

Well, in any case, do read *Volume 3* when it comes out.

Oh, just like last time, all you people reading the author's sloppy writing, cheer him on and buy more of his books.

From the Author's Official Representative.
Thank you all very, very much.
—"L" (bowing head deeply)

IN THE NEXT VOLUME...

# Slayers

3

## The Ghost of Sairaag

# In the Next Volume:

The whole world is after our favorite flat-chested sorceress Lina Inverse and her two priceless partners in crime—Gourry and Zelgadiss. It seems that a certain Red Priest, who they thought they'd defeated two months earlier, is not only alive but is also out for revenge. With a bounty placed on their heads, the trio sets out for Sairaag, where the Rezo is rumored to be hiding.

Lina's travel plans usually include demon attacks, mind-blowing spells, and mass murder, and the voyage to Sairaag should be no exception. But what other surprises will Lina and her gang encounter? Will betrayal and unrequited love make the terrain even rockier? Is the Red Priest the real deal or a resuscitated replica? And, last but not least—how will you be able to function without the next installment of *Slayers!* Be sure to visit your local bookstores for *Volume 3: The Ghost of Sairaag.*